

How SEL and Mindfulness Can Work Together

By [Linda Lantieri](#), [Vicki Zakrzewski](#) | April 7, 2015

When taught together, social-emotional learning and mindfulness can have even greater impact on both individuals and the world around us.

If you're an educator interested in developing students' social and emotional well-being, it can be hard to know where to start. Which social-emotional learning (SEL) program should you [choose](#)? Or would it be better to focus on mindfulness? Perhaps you've heard great things about both, and, in the end, don't they just do the same thing?



The confusion is especially understandable given that research in both fields suggests some similar [outcomes](#) for [students](#): increased academic achievement and well-being, less risky behavior, and better relationships with peers and teachers.

SEL and mindfulness, in fact, *are* two separate areas—that work great when taught and learned together. Thus, choosing one over the other may not actually be the best choice.

One of us ([Linda](#)) has had a front-row seat in the development of both SEL and the practice of mindfulness in education, as a co-founder of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)) and other researched-based SEL and mindfulness programs. With over 40 years of experience, Linda has learned that *both* SEL and mindfulness may be necessary to truly make a difference in students' lives and in the [world](#).

But how can they be integrated? The answer is that one works from the outside-in—and the other works from the inside-out. When the two come together in the mind of a student, the effect can be powerful.

The difference between SEL and mindfulness

To start, SEL uses an outside-in approach with a focus on teaching skills: a teacher introduces a skill such as recognizing an emotion or using “I” messages, the students practice it for a set amount of time, and then the teacher moves on to the next skill. SEL assumes that this process is enough to enable students to use the skill in all relevant, real-life situations.

Mindfulness, on the other hand, works from the inside out, drawing on the premise that each person has the innate capacity for relationship-building qualities such as empathy and kindness—a premise that [research](#) now supports.

By helping students become aware of and then embody the connection between their emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations, students are better able to regulate their emotions, which then impacts things such as their behavior, stress levels, relationships, and ability to focus. In short, mindfulness practices connect students' inner and outer experiences and help them see the congruence between the two.

Cultivating in tandem

SEL and mindfulness, however, are each limited in their own way. Telling students to use an “I” message when they get angry doesn't guarantee that they will do so when their emotions are running high. And just because someone practices mindfulness doesn't mean they have the skills to resolve conflicts.

The limitation of SEL was really brought home to Linda when a male student who had been taught SEL skills through the [Resolving Conflict Creatively Program](#) lost control of himself. The boy had been serving as a conflict mediator in his high school when he heard balloons pop. By the third pop, he had shoved the student who was popping the balloons up against the wall.

The principal called Linda and said, “I don't know what went on here. I know he has these SEL skills. Now I have to suspend him and he'll never be a mediator again.” When Linda talked to the student, she found out that at one point in his life he had had a loaded gun shoved into his mouth that thankfully didn't go off. She quickly realized that because balloon popping sounded like gunfire, the student had been emotionally triggered and lashed out.

So, even though this student knew how to mediate conflicts—a standard SEL skill, because his amygdala had “hijacked” him, he wasn't able to access those skills when he really needed them. If this student's training had included mindfulness, he would have been more likely to notice that something was going on in his body when he heard the balloons pop. With this awareness, he could have chosen to regulate his emotions through deep breathing or some other technique and then use the skills he had learned through RCCP.

On the other hand, children who just learn mindfulness without SEL skills may be able to calm their emotions in a difficult situation, but still make wrong choices when it comes to getting along with others. For example, students who are insecurely attached – meaning they haven't experienced a safe, trusting relationship with a main caregiver – might have a belief that, in general, people are not to be [trusted](#); thus, these students may not possess the skills for forming positive relationships with peers and teachers.

Integrating SEL and mindfulness

When SEL and mindfulness are integrated, the [five SEL competencies laid out by CASEL](#) have more fertile ground in which to grow and ultimately be embodied by students and adults alike. For example:

- **Competency 1: Self-awareness** Students' self-awareness deepens when enhanced by the mindfulness practices of focusing attention and self-compassion.
- **Competency 2: Self-management** Mindfulness increases students' emotion regulation skills, which enhances their ability to resolve conflict more creatively or to say how they're feeling in an emotionally balanced way.
- **Competency 3: Social awareness** Mindfulness increases students' empathy by helping them to regulate their emotions rather than get emotionally overwhelmed when faced with a difficult situation. As a result, their capacity to notice another person's suffering and respond to it increases.

- **Competency 4: Relationship skills** Mindfulness increases compassion. Thus, when students practice SEL skills such as creating a win-win solution with someone who challenges them, they are doing so with more compassionate understanding.
- **Competency 5: Decision-making** Mindfulness increases cognitive flexibility and creativity, which gives students a wider range of responses to challenging situations.

Being the change in the world

Ultimately, when taught and learned together, mindfulness and SEL have the potential to transform our communities and our world with the former cultivating the tendencies for compassion and ethical ways of living and the latter teaching the skills to make that happen.

Linda saw this potential while working with schools in New Orleans when the city was rated the highest in the country for daily shootings. One day when she was teaching students SEL skills, a siren went off in the school and all the children hid under their desks.

One child said to Linda, “Ma’am, Ma’am, please duck and cover. Please duck and cover.” Linda then realized that there was a free-for-all shooting happening outside and that the bullets might come in through the classroom windows. The shock of the situation made Linda wonder if there was truly any value in the skills she was teaching to these children.

Later, she asked this group of fifth grade students, “How many of you have been using these skills?” and they all raised their hands. But then one child said, “You know, it’s very sad. We’re using these skills, but then we go outside and we see terrible things. I saw someone get killed yesterday.” Then Linda asked all the students, “How many of you have ever seen somebody get killed?” Again, every hand went up.

But then another child raised his hand and said, “Wait a minute, I just thought of one thing. I realize that even though those bad kids and bad adults are out there, pretty soon we are going to grow up and *we’re going to be those adults*. And that’s where it’s going to change. That’s how it will change for good.”

And that *is* how it will change for good.

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