



KATE MALONEY FOR USAID

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND SOFT SKILLS

USAID Education Policy Brief

SUGGESTED CITATION

United States Agency for International Development (USAID). “Social and Emotional Learning and Soft Skills USAID Policy Brief,” (2019).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We deeply appreciate the following external reviewers, who gave feedback on an earlier draft of this brief: J. Lawrence Aber, Ph.D., Theresa Betancourt, Sc.D., the Education in Conflict and Crisis Network (ECCN) Social and Emotional Learning Task Team, Brent Elder, Ph.D., Meredith Gould, Ph.D., Interagency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE) Social and Emotional/Psychosocial Support Task Team, Tia Kim, Ph.D., Bassem Nasir, the Special Olympics, and Wietse Tol, Ph.D.

The following staff at USAID authored this brief: Kalene Resler, Anjuli Shivshanker, Samantha Alvis, Chris Capacci-Carneal, Melissa Chiappetta, Lauren Greubel, Julie Hanson Swanson, Ashley Henderson, Josh Josa, Laura Lartigue, Rebeca Martinez, Leah Maxson, Olga Merchan, Yolande Miller-Grandvaux, Sandy Oleksy-Ojikutu, Rebecca Pagel, Nancy Taggart, Nina Weisenhorn, and Wendy Wheaton.

CONTENTS

SUGGESTED CITATION	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. USAID TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS	1
3. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS OR SOFT SKILLS IN ACHIEVING EDUCATION AND YOUTH OUTCOMES	4
4. THE BEST AVAILABLE EVIDENCE ON THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS OR SOFT SKILLS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH	5
5. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE LEARNING	8
6. PROGRAM QUALITY PRINCIPLES	9
7. KEY RESOURCES	11

I. INTRODUCTION

Achieving sustainable, quality learning and improving education outcomes are foundational drivers of a country's journey to self-reliance. Extensive evidence illustrates that children and youth with strong social and emotional skills or soft skills do better in school,¹ in life,² and at work³ because they gain the skills needed to lead productive lives and contribute positively to society. Both the 2018 [USG Strategy on International Basic Education](#) and the 2018 [USAID Education Policy](#) emphasize the importance of social and emotional skills or soft skills in assuring the long-term success of children and youth. Through the Strategy and Policy, USAID is providing new opportunities to systematically design, measure, implement, and understand the impact of programs that build social and emotional skills or soft skills for children and youth.

To support USAID staff and implementing partners in this work, this brief:

1. Provides an introductory understanding of what USAID means by the terms “social and emotional skills” and “soft skills” and how to communicate about them.
2. Specifies the desired outcomes and quality standards for programming that teach social and emotional skills or soft skills.
3. Identifies areas in which evidence and best practices still have gaps, and areas in which we should consider investing in further learning.

2. USAID TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

Several sectors, including education, use the umbrella terms “social and emotional skills” and “soft skills” to refer to a broad set of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies that affect how children and youth interact with each other, solve problems, make decisions, and feel about themselves. Navigating the often-overlapping use of these umbrella terms within and across sectors and countries can pose a challenge in programming towards skills development. As outlined in the USAID Education Policy, USAID will continue to use the term “social and emotional skills” for basic education programming and the term “soft skills” for youth workforce and higher education programming. The remainder of this section provides additional clarity and guidance on how USAID will define and use

¹ Rebecca D. Taylor et al., “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects.” *Child Development* 88, no. 4 (2017): 1156-71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>; Joseph A. Durlak et al., “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions.” *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (2011): 405-32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>.

² Damon E. Jones et al., “Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness.” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 11 (2015): 2283-90, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630>; Sarah Gates et al., “Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes.” Washington, D.C. USAID’s YouthPower: Implementation, YouthPower Action. (2016).

³ Laura H. Lippman et al., “Workforce Connections: Key “Soft Skills” That Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields.” *Child Trends* #2015-24 (2015).

these terms and gives guidance on how to effectively collaborate and communicate about these skills within and across sectors.

Box 1. Illustrative Social and Emotional Skills⁶

1. Self awareness: self-confidence, self-efficacy, identifying emotions
2. Self management: self-discipline, impulse control, stress management
3. Social awareness: empathy, respect for others, perspective taking
4. Relationship skills: communication, teamwork
5. Responsible decision-making: identifying problems, analyzing situations

The USAID Education Policy defines “soft skills” as a “broad set of skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals.”⁵ Within USAID, the term “soft skills” has typically been used in youth workforce development programs, higher education programs, and in the context of cross-sectoral positive youth development programming, aligning with USAID’s vision to help youth become healthy, productive, included, and engaged individuals.

The USAID Education Policy defines “social and emotional skills” as a “set of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies that children, youth, and adults learn through explicit, active, focused, sequenced instruction that allows them to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”⁴ Within USAID, the terms “social and emotional skills” and a common variant, “social and emotional learning,” are typically used in the context of formal or non-formal education programming, across all levels of the education system.

Box 2. Illustrative Soft Skills Correlated to Workforce Outcomes⁷

1. Higher-order thinking skills: problem solving, critical thinking, decision-making
2. Self-control: delay gratification, impulse control, directing and focusing attention, managing emotions, regulating behavior
3. Social skills: respecting others, using context-appropriate behavior, resolving conflict
4. Communication skills: oral, written, and non-verbal communication
5. Positive self-concept: self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-awareness and beliefs, self-esteem, well-being, and pride

⁴ This definition from the 2018 USAID Education Policy comes from the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#), a U.S.-based institute that produces research evidence and practical guidance for implementing social and emotional learning throughout school systems.

⁵ USAID. *2018 USAID Education Policy*. Washington, DC (2018).

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/2018_Education_Policy_FINAL_WEB.pdf. USAID has funded a series of studies that demonstrate the importance of soft skills development for fostering positive youth outcomes in multiple domains, including reproductive health, violence prevention, and workforce success. Please see the [Youth Power Learning Agenda website](#) for an up-to-date list of studies.

⁶ [CASEL](#) provides the most up-to-date theory and research on education programs that support this list of skills.

⁷ L. Hinson, C. Kapungu, C. Jessee, M. Skinner, M. Bardini, and T. Evans-Whipp. “Measuring Positive Youth Development Toolkit: A Guide for Implementers of Youth.” Washington, D.C.: YouthPower Learning, Making Cents International (2016); F. Soares, S. Babb, O. Diener, S. Gates, and C. Ignatowski. “Guiding Principles for Building Soft Skills among Adolescents and Young Adults.” Washington, D.C.: USAID’s YouthPower (2017); Lippman et al., “Workforce Connections: Key “Soft Skills” That Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields,” 2015.

Communicating Effectively about Social and Emotional Skills or Soft Skills

Box 3. Communicating with a Ministry of Education

Many countries in which USAID works have policies or programs related to social and emotional learning or soft skills development based on their own cultural, historical, or social contexts.

USAID worked with three State Agencies for Mass Education in Nigeria to develop curriculum and scripted lessons on social and emotional learning for Nonformal Learning Centers using existing curriculum. Age-appropriate social and emotional competencies were already defined within the Nigerian Ministry of Education Civic Education Curriculum and served as a contextually relevant framework for adaptation to non-formal education for crisis-affected, displaced learners.

Over the past few decades, skills development in children and youth has been studied in many sectors, producing a wealth of evidence on a wide range of child and youth outcomes and a variety of definitions and terms for social and emotional skills or soft skills. Outside of USAID, staff and partners will hear and see different terms being used and will need to adapt their language to work effectively across disciplines.

The fields of psychology and education most often use the term “social and emotional skills” or “non-academic skills,” while disciplines of economics, agriculture, workforce development, and the private sector tend to use the terms “soft skills,” “transferable skills,” “life skills,” or “non-cognitive skills.” The fields of gender and global health also use “life skills,” with social and emotional competencies being a key subset of these skills. Practitioners from humanitarian or social services backgrounds may use the term “psychosocial support” or “holistic well-being.” The

field of public mental health views soft skills as a part of positive mental health; programs aimed at building soft skills can be a part of mental health promotion.

Do: Familiarize yourself with the other broad terms different professional disciplines use to talk about a similar set of skills.⁸

Do: Establish a shared language and vision with country stakeholders (Ministry of Education, implementing partners, other donors, etc.).

Do: Explicitly name and define a skill and a measurement approach. Assure all stakeholders agree on the answers to the following questions:

- What outcomes does this program hope to achieve? For which population?
- What is the role of social and emotional skills or soft skills in achieving the outcomes? How do they fit into the theory of change?
- How will we measure these skills?

Don't: Assume that other stakeholders have the same definition of a skill as USAID, even if the terminology is identical or similar.

⁸ Gates et al., “Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes,” 2016, provides an example of how specific terms are used across sectors of youth workforce, violent prevention, and sexual and reproductive health.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS OR SOFT SKILLS IN ACHIEVING EDUCATION AND YOUTH OUTCOMES

The USAID Education Policy supports partner country education systems to provide all children and youth with the education and skills needed to be productive members of society. In order to achieve this goal, the Policy identifies four priorities that are critical to supporting countries on their journey to self-reliance:

1. Children and youth, particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable, have increased access to quality education that is safe, relevant, and promotes social well-being.⁹
2. Children and youth gain literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional skills that are foundational to future learning and success.
3. Youth gain the skills they need to lead productive lives, gain employment, and positively contribute to society.
4. Higher education institutions have the capacity to be central actors in development by conducting and applying research, delivering quality education, and engaging with communities.

Skills development plays a role in achieving all four education priorities in a variety of ways:

1. By providing quality, safe, and inclusive services delivered by supportive adults and role models that build learners' social and emotional skills, education systems will be able to reach and retain all learners, particularly the most marginalized.
2. By building learners' social and emotional skills, education systems may boost the growth of academic outcomes, such as literacy and numeracy skills.
3. In crisis and conflict settings, education services that teach social and emotional skills may help mitigate the negative effects of prolonged exposure to conflict and crisis.
4. Education and training can equip youth with soft skills that can help them be successful in a variety of career pathways.
5. Higher education institutions are drivers of development. They can build the social and emotional skills of teachers and training professionals so they may create a more inclusive,

⁹ The USAID Education Policy identifies these children as girls, children affected by or emerging from armed conflict or humanitarian crises, children and youth with disabilities, children in remote or rural areas (including those who lack access to safe water and sanitation), religious or ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, orphans and children affected by HIV/AIDS, child laborers, married adolescents, children and youth who are sexual minorities, and victims of trafficking.

supportive classroom environment. They have a unique role in preparing learners with the advanced knowledge and skills they need to succeed in today's global economy. They also drive contextually specific and country-owned research and learning.

Equal access to quality education is a foundational driver of a country's journey to self-reliance. The concept of self-reliance¹⁰ applies not only to education systems and institutions in partner countries, but also to the children, youth, and communities who benefit from education. The development of social and emotional skills or soft skills through education can foster individual self-reliance by providing individuals with the capability to act independently, adapt to changing conditions, and make the most of their assets and opportunities. Additionally, skills development provides strong returns in individual earnings and income. In high-income contexts, programming has been shown to return \$11 of benefits back to society for every \$1 invested because children and youth who benefit from these programs gain the skills they need to lead productive lives and contribute positively to society.¹¹

Building social and emotional skills or soft skills among citizens is an investment in the human capital of a country. When a country's future leaders and policymakers develop key soft skills such as goal setting and responsible decision-making, governance can improve. Competencies such as social awareness and empathy may lead to more inclusive, equitable development and decrease conflict. Additionally, in conflict and crisis contexts, individuals with basic education and foundational literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional skills can be more resilient,¹² adaptive to new environments, and able to overcome personal, social, and economic obstacles.

4. THE BEST AVAILABLE EVIDENCE ON THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS OR SOFT SKILLS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

USAID recognizes the importance of social and emotional skills or soft skills for all children and youth regardless of where they are in their educations. This recognition is in part based on the extensive body of existing evidence from various fields in the United States, Europe, or other high-income contexts, as well as emerging evidence from low- and middle-income countries. Though more rigorous evidence from the settings where USAID and partners work is urgently needed, the best available evidence illustrates that:

- Education programs that promote social and emotional skills can improve children and youth's attitudes about themselves and others, increase positive social behaviors, reduce conduct

¹⁰ Self-reliance in the education sector entails a country's capacity to plan, finance, and implement quality education for all children and youth, and a commitment to do so effectively, inclusively, and with accountability.

¹¹ Clive Belfield et al., "The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning." Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education Teachers College, Columbia University, (2015, revised version), www.cbcse.org.

¹² USAID. "Resilience at USAID: 2016 Progress Report." Washington, D.C. (2016), Retrieved from https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1867/082816_Resilience_FinalB.PDF.

problems, reduce emotional distress, and importantly, improve academic performance.¹³ This includes students with disabilities.¹⁴

- Education programs that purposefully and actively build social and emotional skills also can foster inclusivity at school.¹⁵ They may reduce bias in discipline, school management, or instructional approaches that prevent girls,¹⁶ children with disabilities, minorities, or other types of marginalized learners from accessing and benefitting from school.¹⁷ They may reduce stigmas associated with disability, increase self-worth, and provide a sense of belongingness among children with disabilities.¹⁸ Disability-inclusive education programs can improve the social and emotional skills of students with and without disabilities.¹⁹

Box 4. Teacher Professional Development in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

An impact evaluation in Uganda found that strengthening the social and emotional skills of teachers creates a safer, more supportive school environment and reduces the incidence of corporal punishment ([Devries et al. 2015, e383-e384](#)).

An impact evaluation in the DRC found that teacher professional development and an improved literacy, numeracy, and a social and emotional skills curriculum improved students' perceptions of their schools as safe and supportive and improved their literacy and numeracy skills. ([Torrente et al. 2019](#)).

- Exposure to violence and adversity can lead to impairments in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental well-being.²⁰ The harmful effects of toxic stress can be blocked or even

¹³ Durlak et al., “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” 2011; Taylor et al., “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects,” 2017.

¹⁴ Roy McConkey et al. “Promoting Social Inclusion Through Unified Sports for Youth with Intellectual Disabilities: A Five-Nation Study.” *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 57, no. 10 (2012): 923-35. A qualitative, descriptive study that explores and explains the impact that inclusive programming can have on the social and emotional skills of children or youth with disabilities.

¹⁵ Example: one-year impacts of a universal social and emotional learning intervention with primary school students in the Democratic Republic of Congo illustrated that impacts were largest for the math scores of language minority children and in low-performing schools. J. Lawrence Aber et al., “Impacts After One Year of “Healing Classroom” on Children’s Reading and Math Skills in DRC: Results From a Cluster Randomized Trial.” *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 10, no. 3 (2017): 507-29.

¹⁶ Ha Yeon Kim et al., “The Impact of IRC’s Healing Classrooms Tutoring on Children’s Learning and Social-Emotional Outcomes in Niger.” International Rescue Committee and New York University Policy Brief, Number 2.2.2 (2019).

¹⁷ Overview of how social and emotional skills may help create more equitable, inclusive classrooms: Anne Gregory et al., “Social and Emotional Learning: Social and Emotional Learning and Equity in School Discipline.” *The Future of Children* 27, no. 1 (2017): 117-36.

¹⁸ Valeria Cavioni et al., “Social and Emotional Learning for Children with Learning Disability: Implications for Inclusion.” *International Journal of Emotional Education* 9, no. 2 (2017): 100-9.

¹⁹ Todd Grindal et al., “A Summary of the Research Evidence on Inclusive Education.” Abt Associates. (2016).

reversed when children have safe learning environments, nurturing relationships with key adults, and develop social and emotional skills.²¹ Crisis-affected children also can benefit most from social-emotional learning interventions in terms of improving academic achievement.²²

Box 5. Employment in Rwanda

A rigorous impact evaluation of a program in Rwanda that provided soft skills training and school-to-work transition supports increased youth's soft skills and their incidence of employment relative to a control group (Alcid and Martin 2017, 1-4).

- Teachers are critical partners for children's social, emotional, and academic development,²³ and their own well-being is correlated with better classroom management practices and relationship building, which contributes to improved student behavior and academic achievement.²⁴
- Employers particularly value advanced cognitive and soft skills in their employees.²⁵ Social skills, higher-order thinking, and self-control contribute to four types of workforce outcomes: employment, performance, income/wages, and entrepreneurial success.²⁶ Leadership, a complex soft skill, requires mastery of social skills, communication, self-control, and the ability to perceive and manage emotions.²⁷
- Enhancing youth's communication, conflict management, and problem-solving skills, and assisting them with building positive peer-to-peer relationships can contribute to the prevention of emotional, physical,²⁸ and potentially even sexual abuse and violence.²⁹ Social and emotional skills or soft skills can serve as protective assets for young women, particularly those who are outside of school or in the workforce. Programs focusing on skills development in adolescent

²⁰ Jack P. Shonkoff et al., "The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress." *Pediatrics* 129, no. 1 (2012): e232-e246.

²¹ Rana Dajani et al., "Hair Cortisol Concentrations in War-Affected Adolescents: A Prospective Intervention Trial." *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 89 (2018): 138-46.

²² Stephanie M. Jones et al., "Two-Year Impacts of a Universal School-Based Social-Emotional and Literacy Intervention: An Experiment in Translational Developmental Research." *Child Development* 82, no. 2 (2011): 533-54.

²³ P.A. Jennings et al., "Impacts of the CARE for Teachers Program on Teachers' Social and Emotional Competence and Classroom Interactions." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 109, no. 7 (2017): 1010-1028.

²⁴ Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl, "Social and Emotional Learning and Teachers." *The Future of Children* 27, no. 1 (2017): 137-55.

²⁵ Wendy Cunningham et al., "Employer Voices, Employer Demands, and Implications for Public Skills Development Policy Connecting the Labor and Education Sectors." World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper WPS7582 (2016).

²⁶ Lippman et al., "Workforce Connections: Key "Soft Skills" That Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields," (2015).

²⁷ David Rosete et al., "Emotional Intelligence and Its Relationship to Workplace Performance Outcomes of Leadership Effectiveness." *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 26, no. 5 (2005): 388-99, <https://doi.org/10.1108/01437730510607871>.

²⁸ Sandra J. Wilson et al., "School-based Interventions for Aggressive and Disruptive Behavior: Update of a Meta-Analysis." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 33, no. 2 (2007): S130-S143, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2007.04.011>.

²⁹ Kristin L. Dunkle et al., "Perpetration of Partner Violence and HIV Risk Behaviour Among Young Men in the Rural Eastern Cape, South Africa." *AIDS* 20, no. 16 (2006): 2107-14, [10.1097/01.aids.0000247582.00826.52](https://doi.org/10.1097/01.aids.0000247582.00826.52).

girls have been shown to decrease risky sexual behavior, improve health outcomes, delay early marriage, and improve future livelihoods.³⁰

5. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE LEARNING

The size of the evidence base in context to where USAID works does not yet match the size of the evidence base in the United States; however, it is growing. USAID’s policy commitment to social and emotional skills or soft skills for children and youth at all levels of the education system, both formal and non-formal, requires focused investments in research and learning.

USAID and partners are well-placed to make significant contributions to the global understanding of the use, significance, and sustainability of programming for social and emotional skills or soft skills and related outcomes. Potential questions include:

- What interventions effectively and cost-effectively improve learners’ social and emotional skills or soft skills, particularly in crisis and conflict-affected contexts? What are the causal mechanisms through which interventions produce impacts? How can effective interventions be brought to scale in different education systems?
- In contexts where academic achievement is low, what is the relationship between social and emotional skills and academic achievement over time, particularly for the most marginalized students?
- How do gender, power, privilege, and culture interact with social and emotional skills or soft skills development?³¹ Are certain skills more meaningful to positive outcomes in some contexts than in others?
- How does an inclusive learning environment influence the development of social and emotional skills or soft skills in all students, including those who are from marginalized groups?
- What are the most effective and cost-effective ways to measure social and emotional skills or soft skills for different types of learners, teachers, instructors, faculty, or caregivers? What are the most effective and cost-effective ways to measure implementation of interventions,

Box 6. Psychosocial interventions teach skills and improve well-being

An impact evaluation of a program for Syrian and Jordanian adolescents, ages 12-18, showed that a structured, 8-week psychosocial intervention that taught participants to manage their impulses, assess risk, and rebuild empathy for themselves and others led to improved psychosocial well-being for both Syrians and Jordanians and decreased risk of mental health disorders. Important gender differences exist. Impacts for improved perceptions of safety and protection were limited to young men only. ([Kurtz, 2016](#); [Panter-Brick et al., 2017](#)).

³⁰ Kendra Dupuy et al., “Life Skills in Non-Formal Contexts for Adolescent Girls in Developing Countries.” CMI Report, Number 5. (2018).

³¹ Gregory et al., “Social and Emotional Learning: Social and Emotional Learning and Equity in School Discipline,” 2017.

specifically the way they are sequenced and children and youth's exposure to various components of the intervention?

- How does technology enable effective social and emotional or soft skills programming?
- How do we best engage with higher education institutions to create contextually relevant research on how social and emotional skills or soft skills investments grow a country's human capital and reinforce or amplify the impact of investments in education and youth workforce?
- How do higher education institutions best prepare a workforce of teachers, instructors, or faculty members to build social and emotional skills or soft skills for children and youth?

USAID's Office of Education is working to answer these types of questions in both stable and crisis and conflict-affected settings, at several levels of the education system both formally and non-formally, and with a focus on equity and inclusion. USAID's Office of Education will use the most rigorous methodologies available for the question; for example, if the question seeks to understand the effectiveness of an intervention, USAID recommends using an impact evaluation.

6. PROGRAM QUALITY PRINCIPLES

USAID provides basic program, quality principles for staff and partners to keep in mind when designing and implementing activities or programs that aim to grow social and emotional skills or soft skills for learners across the education continuum. When designing any program, USAID staff and partners should judiciously apply the best available evidence and draw on local expertise. These principles complement the existing [guiding principles for building soft skills in youth-focused programming](#).

1. Make the theory of change explicit. Identify the role that specific social and emotional skills or soft skills plays in achieving the desired outcomes in the results framework. At the activity level, the logic model or results framework should name specific social and emotional skills or soft skills, as well as identify how the learning environment and teachers, instructors, faculty, or caregivers reinforce their positive development. This sets the vision for USAID, ministry partners, implementing partners, and other stakeholders.
2. Understand the starting point for children and youth, the adults who teach them, and their families and caregivers. Target populations may already have important social and emotional skills or soft skills.
3. Tailor the way teachers, instructors, or faculty articulate, teach, and measure social and emotional skills or soft skills to the specific cultural context, prevailing social norms, age, developmental stage, and sex of the beneficiaries.

4. Ensure that the learning environment and the relationship between learners and their teachers, instructors, or faculty provide positive opportunities to practice and reinforce their learned skills.^{32,33} At a minimum, the learning environment must be physically and emotionally safe.
5. Ensure that the instructional content and other activities not included in the curriculum or classroom provide children and youth with relevant, appropriately sequenced, active, focused, and explicit instruction.³⁴ Relevant instruction teaches skills in combination, not in isolation,³⁵ and can be delivered in myriad ways beyond academic lesson plans, including teacher- or caregiver-focused activities, play-based learning, service learning projects, or extracurricular activities.
6. Leverage existing teachers and leaders. Social and emotional skills or soft skills instruction can be provided to and by teachers, instructors, or faculty; specialty staff are not required.³⁶
7. Train staff on a referral pathway to child protection and/or age-appropriate health services for learners. Social and emotional skills or soft skills programming does not replace the right children and youth have to legal services, health services, protective services, or other social services.
8. Map out where structural inequalities will limit the effectiveness of social and emotional skills. While social and emotional skills or soft skills have been shown to increase the agency and resilience of youth at the individual level, breaking down barriers to opportunities for all learners requires analysis and understanding of the structural inequalities present at other levels of the system.
9. Measure skill levels of children, youth, and their instructors or teachers at baseline, endline, and along the life of the intervention at critical points, for example in response to a shock or stress (like gang violence, displacement, or a natural disaster). Taking baseline assessments for social and emotional skills or soft skills alongside other pre-designed assessments on gender or social inclusion³⁷ will support interventions that teach at the right level for all learners, including

³² Soares et al., “Guiding Principles for Building Soft Skills among Adolescents and Young Adults,” (2017).

³³ James Rogan and Gwen Heaner, “Rapid Education and Risk Analysis Toolkit.” USAID. (2015).

³⁴ In the United States, programs that provide sequenced, active, explicit, focused instruction positively impact social and emotional skills, attitudes, social behavior, conduct problems, academic performance, and emotional distress. Programs that do not meet these quality standards affect only attitudes, conduct problems, and academic performance (i.e., they ultimately do not affect social and emotional skills or trigger the causal pathways linked to social and emotional skills). Durlak et al., “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” (2011).

³⁵ EducationLinks. “Guiding Principles For Building Soft Skills.” (2017) Accessed from: <https://www.edulinks.org/resources/guiding-principles-building-soft-skills>.

³⁶ When school personnel (e.g., teachers, instructors, or faculty members) as opposed to non-school personnel deliver social and emotional skills programs, academic achievement improves. Durlak et al., “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” 2011.

³⁷ USAID’s [ADS Chapter 205](#) (2017) and [How-To Note: Disability Inclusive Education](#) (2018) provide further guidance on this principle.

women and girls and learners with disabilities,³⁸ and provide appropriate professional development for teachers, instructors, and faculty. Measuring results of the programs that build social and emotional skills or soft skills will help grow the evidence base in contexts where USAID works, even though validated tools for measuring social and emotional skills or soft skills still are emerging.

7. KEY RESOURCES

While the section above provides key programming principles for USAID staff and partners to follow when designing and implementing activities that develop social and emotional skills or soft skills, additional guidance on skills definitions, programming approaches, implementation guidance, and measurement tools can be found on [EducationLinks](#). USAID invites partners to share their successes and challenges in implementing, measuring, and evaluating programs focused on growing the social and emotional skills or soft skills of children and youth through this [submission form](#) on EducationLinks.

³⁸ Anne Hayes, Ann Turnbull, and Norma Moran, “Universal Design for Learning to Help All Children Read: Promoting Literacy for Learners with Disabilities.” USAID, Toolkit for International Education Stakeholders, (2018).