



# Getting Started with Harmony SEL

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## Benefits of Teachers Using Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs in U.S. Schools

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been established by practitioners and researchers as an essential ingredient of Pre-K to Grade 12 students' development as learners and future citizens. However, key implementation challenges often occur as schools attempt to integrate SEL programming into their instructional routine. Lack of instructional time, inadequate implementation support, and limited common knowledge of SEL teaching strategies among teachers are all common challenges that schools face. In this brief, readers, particularly classroom teachers, will learn practical, evidence-based information about the importance and uses of SEL. We focus specific attention on strategies related to Harmony SEL, an evidence-based SEL program housed at National University, as well as on more general strategies that schools across the country have used to promote effective implementation of SEL. We examine what Harmony entails, its research base, and most critically, the best practices for employing it in contemporary classrooms.



# What is SEL?

Although multiple frameworks exist that promote effective social and emotional development (Berg, Nolan, Yoder, et al., 2019), most practitioners and policy makers are familiar with and use the five core social and emotional competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Bryant, Crowley, & Davidsen, 2020; Dusenbury, Yoder, Dermody, & Weissberg, 2020). CASEL recently updated their framework (see Figure 1) to be more inclusive of equity and culture and elevated the key settings in which young people develop and apply their competencies (CASEL, 2020).

Specifically, the updated definition, expansions on the five core competencies, and key settings include additional emphases on:

- Defining the importance of systemic SEL, in which school systems must focus on the adults' social and emotional competencies and capacities to support students and the use of data for continuous improvement.
- Identifying strategies to connect with families and communities to meet the social and emotional needs of students and adults.
- Understanding the context in which students grow and develop as critical ingredients to social and emotional development.
- Using science to demonstrate that social and emotional development are core functions to academic learning and human development.
- Centering the role of agency, identity, and belonging as core components of any SEL program and practice.
- Elevating skills that promote equity and excellence within the five core competencies, such as understanding social, cultural, and linguistic assets; understanding the influences of organizations and systems on behavior; and standing up for the rights of others.

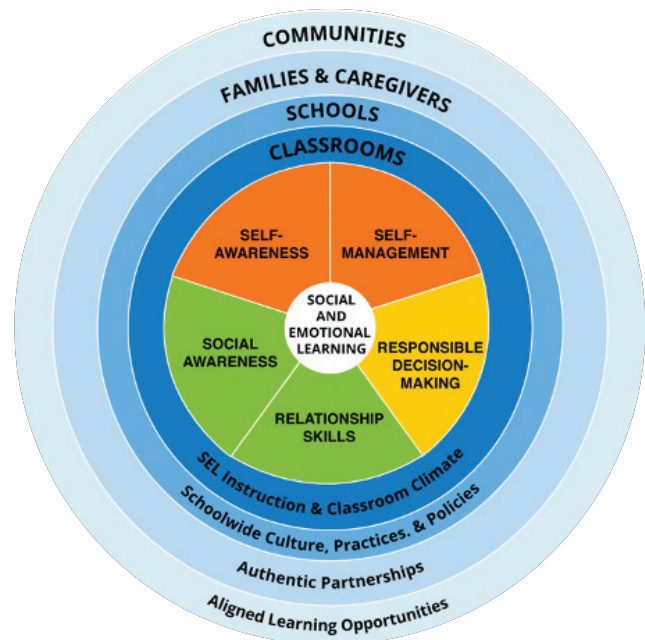


Figure 1.  
CASEL's framework for social and emotional learning<sup>1</sup>

Implementing an evidence-based SEL program and integrating these core components with an eye towards equity and excellence is no easy task for educators and school leaders (Mahoney et al., 2020). In the next section, we examine what the SEL research tells us about what works in practice, with a careful look at the Harmony program as a positive exemplar.

<sup>1</sup> Image retrieved from <https://casel.org/SEL-framework/>

## *The Harmony SEL Program: From Research to Practice*

Research has found that early and middle childhood are crucially important windows for laying the foundation of social and emotional skills (Baustani et al., 2019; Schaps & Battistich, 1991). Not surprisingly, in the past two decades, curricula continue to hit the market aimed at improving children's social and emotional competency (e.g., Baustani et al., 2019; Lawson et al., 2019; Hoffman, 2009). Given the prolific number of SEL curricula developed within the last decade, researchers and scholars have attempted to elevate core components of evidence-based SEL programs (e.g., CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2017; Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). Notably, the Harmony program has been found to exemplify many of the key characteristics identified through this research. Below, drawing from collaborative program development, refinement, and evaluation work by the authors (and the developers of the program from Arizona State University), we focus on the research grounding and conceptual model of the Harmony SEL Program.

### *Program Vision and Goals*

Harmony is currently being used in over 31,000 schools nationwide. Its growing appeal is largely twofold—a solid research base and a high level of practicality and adaptability to diverse classroom schedules and needs. The program, in brief, engages children in relationship-building and instructional activities designed to strengthen socialization, communication, and interpersonal skills. The immediate goal is to produce inclusive classrooms, in which students engage in exploring their differences and commonalities in safe and supportive environments. This approach provides opportunities to create more meaningful relationships across diverse groups of students, improving prosocial behavior and decreasing personal disputes. As more children learn the necessary intra- and inter-personal skills for getting along in authentic spaces, the long-term goal to improve the way in which they, as adults, interact in every facet of society can be achieved.



### *Research on Harmony*

What does the research show about Harmony? Harmony SEL has a strong research base that has been developed across evaluations spanning a wide range of student demographics. Initial research conducted by Arizona State University found that schools using Harmony experienced a variety of positive results, including improvements in student academic achievement and empathy, as well as a decrease in bullying, teasing, aggression, and stereotyping. In a quasi-experimental study with fifth-grade students from a diverse population (with over 40% students of color), researchers found that Harmony had a positive impact on children's peer relations when compared to control groups. Specifically, researchers found that engagement in Harmony improved students' relationships, connection to school, feelings of inclusion, engagement in school, and development of friendships with diverse peers. The researchers also found improved academic outcomes (increased writing and math performance), and decreased aggressive behavior among students (DeLay et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2017). In a separate quasi-experimental study conducted in prekindergarten classrooms, students who engaged in Harmony Practices (i.e., Buddy Up, one of the program's core components) interacted with peers more often, and with a wider variety of peers than students who did not (Hanish et al., 2016).

In addition to these studies, the present authors from the Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) are in the midst of a four-year longitudinal study of 20 Harmony elementary schools in Southern California (Morrison et al., 2019). To date, participating teachers have reported that the program has positively influenced student social and emotional skills including respect for one another, empathy for others, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, self-management, and self-awareness. Students have also noted improvements in themselves and their peers. Students' perceptions of the overall climate in their schools appear to be shifting upward as well. As schools moved from their first to their second year of using the program, students were more likely to express that their peers respect one another, behave well in class, help one another learn, and are treated fairly regardless of their race or background. This growth implies that as students engage more with the program, student outcomes continue to improve.

## Section II The Harmony Program

Harmony's active ingredients—explicit SEL instruction and applying SEL Everyday Practices—define the mechanisms that matter most within the curriculum (see Figure 2). In other words, these are the core beliefs and theory that drive improvements in students' social, emotional, and academic development (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). Explicit instruction occurs within Harmony's five units and lessons comprised of relationship activities that allow students to learn and practice social and emotional skills at least once per week. Lessons and activities include storybooks and discussions, participatory, play-based peer activities, interactive games, hands-on activities, and role-plays (Martin et al., 2017). The program's Everyday Practices of Meet Up, Buddy Up, and Harmony Goals provide students with ongoing and supportive opportunities to interact with peers of diverse backgrounds, to participate in discussions, and to participate in decision-making, problem-solving, and community-building activities (Martin et al., 2017).

Along with these key mechanisms, broad principles of human development are included within Harmony (see Yoder, 2020 for review). For example, units and lessons are developmentally structured so that students engage in more complex tasks as they get older, and skills are identified that can be explicitly learned in lessons but also reinforced during academic instruction. In addition, the program provides opportunities for culturally responsive practices, in which students get to talk about their lived experiences and see themselves within the classroom context. Harmony also recognizes the importance of SEL for educators, including their own competencies and capacities to effectively engage students in SEL programs and practices.

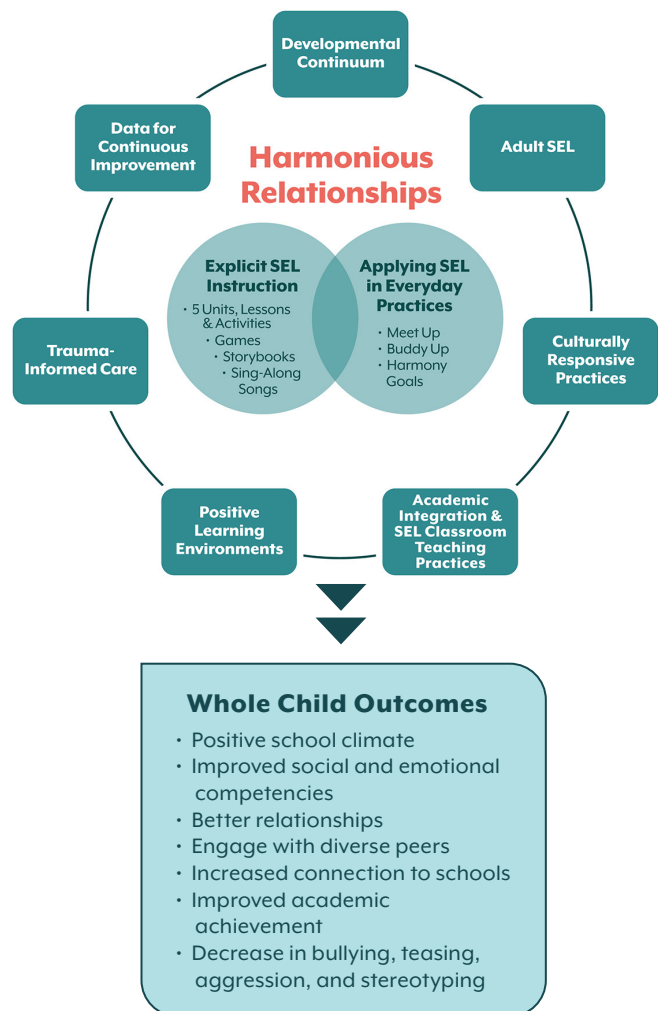


Figure 2.  
Harmony Conceptual Model

## Section III

### Maximizing Success with SEL – Best Practices for Teaching

What does it mean and look like to effectively implement an SEL program? Suppose that you're an educator at a school that is adopting an SEL program for the first time. You ask yourself, "What do I need to know to get started? How can we make sure that we're going to succeed?" In the following section, we provide four best practices for successful implementation of SEL programs and practices. For each best practice, we highlight the research on that practice ("What the Research Shows") and then describe how Harmony aligns with the practice ("Harmony in Action"), and provide example application of that practice ("Application").



#### **BEST PRACTICE #1**

### Explicitly teach social and emotional competencies

#### ***What the Research Shows***

Research consistently finds that students can learn social and emotional competencies through explicit instruction. Social and emotional competencies, after all, are knowledge, attitudes, and skills—all of which can be learned and honed over time. Among a variety of findings, research has shown the benefits of:

- Explicitly teaching a variety of social and emotional skills, including social skills (Durlak et al., 2011; Lawson et al., 2019; Boustani et al., 2019); communication skills (Boustani et al., 2019); and the ability to understand self and others (Boustani et al., 2019; CASEL, 2020; Yoder, 2014).
- Using SEL programs that provide a coordinated sequence of lessons, through active instruction focused on targeted skills that are explicitly learned (or SAFE practices) (Durlak et al., 2011).
- Providing students with ample opportunities to observe adults modeling social and emotional skills (Ahmed et al., 2020; Rivers et al., 2013), particularly with regard to positive social interactions (Slavin, 2009) and emotion regulation.
- Role-playing activities where students have opportunities to "act out," observe, and critique different social scenarios (Boustani et al., 2019) including those that involve "class theatre" (Agle et al., 2019).

#### ***Harmony in Action***

In Harmony classes, teachers explicitly teach social and emotional skills through units and lessons aligned with CASEL domains. Specific skills addressed foster development of:

- Social awareness using Harmony's "Empathy and Critical Thinking" unit and "Diversity and Inclusion" unit;
- Relationships with others using Harmony's "Communication" unit and "Peer Relationships" unit; and
- Responsible decision-making using Harmony's "Problem Solving" unit.

Harmony lessons typically follow a consistent format. They begin with a group discussion, center around a hands-on group activity, and close with students practicing a social and emotional skill they can apply both inside and outside of school.

## BEST PRACTICE #1 (contd.)

### ***Application***

Ms. Gomez is teaching her fourth graders using a lesson from the Harmony unit, “Learning from Empathy.” She begins by leading a class discussion on defining empathy and understanding its importance in students’ lives. She engages students by asking for volunteers to share examples of when they have felt empathy for someone else. She then prompts, “How can you generate empathy by working to understand other people’s points of view?” Next, she places the students in small groups to play the “empathy game.” In the first segment, students take turns acting out emotions while the others in their group try to guess what they are demonstrating. Students then take turns describing different social situations that may elicit certain emotions while their classmates try to guess the answer. To make these skills more concrete and personalized, Ms. Gomez next has the students engage in role-playing where they practice showing empathy toward those in need.

## BEST PRACTICE #2

Include “class meetings” as a regular part of your instructional day

### ***What the Research Shows***

Research has found that “class meetings,” “class-building exercises,” “circle time,” and other types of class “welcoming rituals” foster the development of social and emotional skills and promote a positive climate in the classroom (CASEL, 2018; Dobia et al., 2019; Freiberg & Driscoll, 2005; Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Fogarty, 2002). During these brief activities, the class meets as a group and students greet each other, share stories, review news and announcements, go over learning objectives, and often engage in brief classroom culture-building activities (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; CASEL, 2018). Benefits include skill development with regard to cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self-control; and increasing classroom climates of trust, respect, and belonging between classmates (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Freiberg & Driscoll, 2005).



### ***Harmony in Action***

In Harmony classes, teachers directly foster interpersonal skills, culture building, and problem solving through varied program activities:

- During “Meet Up” students and teachers assemble in a circle to discuss and plan the goals for the day, share experiences, catch up on classroom events, and mutually reinforce teamwork and team spirit.
- “Quick Connection Cards” provide topics and ideas for students to discuss during Meet Up and other social activities. Different types of cards explicitly promote learning about others, joint problem solving, cooperation, and working and playing together as a team.

## **BEST PRACTICE #2** (contd.)

### ***Application***

At the start of the day, Mr. Brady engages his third graders in the “Meet Up” activity of Harmony. He gathers students in a circle, and they all greet each other by name using a special handshake that they devised as a class. Following the handshakes, he chooses two students to share something interesting that they did over the weekend. One student, Louis, tells about his trip to the park to play kickball with his neighbors, while Sarah shares that her family adopted a pet guinea pig. Louis and Sarah then call on several classmates who ask them questions about the kickball game and new pet.

Mr. Brady next leads the class in a “Community Check-in.” He reviews the Harmony Goals that the class established as a group and chooses two students to describe things that the class has been doing particularly well lately. Jack highlights that no one is being left out during recess. Susan proudly notes that everyone scored at least an 80% on the last multiplication exam. When asked to identify any “lows” that occurred, several students offer that a few classmates have been cutting in line at the water fountain. The class briefly discusses this issue and students all agree that from now on, they will be more patient in line.

## **BEST PRACTICE #3**

Provide ample opportunities for students to practice social skills with their peers

### ***What the Research Shows***

Two of the most conclusive, and straightforward, research findings on SEL include: (a) having positive peer relationships is crucially important for social and emotional development (Slavin, 2009; Kerr, Stattin, Biesecker, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2003), and (b) children need opportunities to practice the social and emotional skills they learn in class (Ahmed et al., 2020; Rivers & Brackett, 2010).

By the time children reach adolescence, the number of waking hours they spend with their peers is typically greater than the amount of time they spend by themselves or with their families (Slavin, 2009; Ambert, 1997). It is not surprising that the quality of these peer relationships can play a substantive role in influencing a host of outcomes in childhood and later in adolescence—both academic skills (Slavin, 2009; Kerr, Stattin, Biesecker, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2003) and social and emotional competencies (Dobia et al., 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Research has found that implementing social and emotional learning programs can be an effective means of developing student social skills (Lawson et al., 2019; Boustani et al., 2019; January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011), which in turn can help students form and develop these positive relationships with their peers (Frostad & Pijl, 2007).

### ***Harmony in Action***

Harmony provides extensive opportunities, most explicitly in its “Buddy Up” component, for students to directly practice social skills and develop new friendships. Buddy Up pairs students with different classmates each week where they engage in brief discussions and activities using Quick Connection Cards. In creating student pairs, teachers try to bring together peers of diverse backgrounds who typically wouldn’t work together, helping students identify commonalities between pairs while celebrating differences. Students use a variety of social and emotional competencies during Buddy Up including collaboration, empathy, and caring.

## **BEST PRACTICE #3** (contd.)

### ***Application***

In concluding a Harmony session with her first graders, Ms. Ellison directs the students to Buddy Up. Students move to the front of the room and look at the Buddy Board posted on the wall to identify which classmate they will be paired with for the week ahead. Each then stands next to their newly assigned buddy and waits while Ms. Ellison draws a card from a pile of Quick Connection Cards. Reading the card, Ms. Ellison asks: “What would you do if you had a million dollars?” For two minutes, the buddies share their thoughts with one another. Ms. Ellison then calls on two students, who each share their buddy’s responses as the rest of the class listens.

## **BEST PRACTICE #4**

Use strategies to help develop a safe and supportive classroom culture

### ***What the Research Shows***

As part of good teaching practice, most teachers naturally strive to create a safe and supportive classroom environment in which all students feel welcome. Research shows that positive classroom climates help students develop socially and emotionally (Ahmed et al., 2020; CASEL, 2020; Yoder, 2014). In other words, it is not sufficient to “teach” students social and emotional skills; rather, teachers need to also strive to create environments in which they can thrive in their development. Although multiple strategies exist to promote positive classroom climate, we highlight a few specific practices below that align with evidence-based SEL programs, including Harmony.

### ***CULTURE PRACTICE A:***

#### ***Develop a set of “group norms” as a class***

Group norms, and similarly, sets of class rules co-developed with students are beneficial in helping to build buy-in and commitment to a positive classroom culture (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Curwin & Mendler, 1988; Slicker, 1998). When creating group norms, it is particularly beneficial to communicate to students the value of risk-taking, sharing, and asking questions (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2005; Jacobs, Power, & Inn, 2002).

### ***Harmony in Action***

Harmony teachers and their students typically co-construct Harmony Goals or class goals in early Meet Up sessions. In contrast to traditional classroom rules for behavior, goal construction focuses on how students want to be treated, how they are expected to interact with each other, how they can help each other, and how they can build a positive and safe classroom community.

Key steps in developing goals include:

- discussing what goals are and why they are important,
- working together as a group to establish from three to five goals, and
- creating a Harmony Goals chart.



## **BEST PRACTICE #4** (contd.)

### **CULTURE PRACTICE A** (contd.):

#### **Application**

During the first few weeks of school, Ms. Rosen asks her second graders to “help her set Harmony Goals for how we all should behave with one another in our community.” First, she leads the students in a discussion of why goals might be important, and then she initiates a brainstorming activity where the children share examples of the ways they like and don’t like to be treated. Ms. Rosen records all their ideas on a poster board and the students collaborate in grouping similar ideas together to derive three to five actionable goals. As a final step, she lists the final ideas on the “Harmony Goals Chart” and each student signs the chart signifying their agreement.

### **CULTURE PRACTICE B:**

*Focus primarily on reinforcing positive student behavior.*

Research shows that the most effective forms of classroom behavior management both promote positive behavior and correct misbehavior (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Stage & Quiroz, 1997). However, for developing students’ social and emotional skills in particular, reinforcement of the positive and allowing students to self-correct appears to be most important (Slavin, 2009). Try to “catch students” exhibiting prosocial behaviors (Slavin, 2009) by noting and reinforcing when students go out of their way to show respect to others, help their classmates, or follow class procedures. For example, during SEL instruction, highlight when the class or groups of students exhibit a desirable problem-solving technique, conversation strategy, or empathy skills they learned through explicit SEL instruction.

#### **Harmony in Action**

Harmony teachers are constantly on the lookout throughout the day for positive student behaviors that they can reinforce. A specific resource in each Harmony lesson plan is an “Everyday Moments” section where teachers are given tips, pointers, and specific examples of ways that they can highlight students’ burgeoning social and emotional skills as they exhibit them.

#### **Application**

Mr. Li just finished the lesson on communication bloopers, those communication mishaps that students (and adults) tend to make. Students created a great list of bloopers including interrupting others when they are speaking, not listening, and not staying on topic, to name a few. Throughout the day, Mr. Li notices when students catch themselves making a communications blooper. “Oops, I blooped again,” one student shouted in the middle of a class discussion. Mr. Li let the student know that is exactly what she is supposed to do and asked her how it felt to catch the blooper. The student felt proud of herself and noted it was good to listen to others. Mr. Li agreed but noted she should use her inside voice next time.

## **BEST PRACTICE #4** (contd.)

### **CULTURE PRACTICE C:**

#### *Approach student misbehavior as a teachable moment.*

When addressing student misconduct, it is important to place the focus on the specific behavior rather than on the specific student (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2005). Openly criticizing a student's character, ability to behave in class, or ability to get along with others, just as often leads to resentment as it does behavioral improvement. Rather, honing in on the specific problem behavior (e.g., speaking while another student was speaking), having the student identify how the misbehavior may have impacted others, and then identifying an alternative action to take in the future is generally far more effective. Communicate to students that you expect them to show concern for others (Slavin, 2009; Konig, 1995) while simultaneously using discipline techniques that stress empathy. Having students reflect on the consequences their actions have for other people can promote positive classroom climates and prosocial behavior (Slavin, 2009; Hoffman, 1993).

#### **Harmony in Action**

During Meet-Up, students have the opportunity to bring up problems that they observe in classroom. They have opportunities to discuss with their classmates if they notice that a student misbehaves, and this provides an opportunity for students to repair any harm or damage that has been done. Students can also discuss the social and emotional competencies that they need to more effectively interact with their peers or with classroom materials.

#### **Application**

In his fourth-grade class, Mr. Clemmons uses behavior management practices to help students understand how misbehavior can harm others and harm the overall classroom community. His focus is on helping students identify how they can "make things right" for classmates who may be negatively impacted by misbehavior. Today, during the "highs and lows" portion of Harmony's daily Meet Up activity, Mr. Clemmons assumes the role of mediator in helping two students resolve a conflict that occurred during a kickball game on the playground. First, he offers a few suggestions for how students can make amends ("Discuss how each of you felt during the argument"). Then he asks for their ideas for how the conflict can be avoided in the future. Carlos suggests using "rock, paper, scissors" to determine who goes first in kickball. Scott notes the Harmony strategy of being "like an owl" and thinking through a conflict rather than running from it or escalating it.



## Conclusion

Relationships start with Harmony! Harmony is a unique SEL program that embeds social and emotional skill development in the context of relationships, creating environments in which students can thrive as well as providing opportunities for students to develop and apply their skills. As noted throughout this paper, Harmony provides tools and strategies that align with evidence-based SEL programs and elevates critical ingredients for successful implementation. As teachers, administrators, support staff, counselors, social workers, families, and students work together to implement Harmony components, we can collectively create more harmonious relationships for all students and adults in the school setting.

## Additional Resources

For further research and recommendations in addition to that provided in this brief, please see resources provided by CASEL (2020):

- **The CASEL Guide to Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning** – a comprehensive resource providing guidance and recommendations for schools just getting started with SEL. For more information, visit <https://schoolguide.casel.org>
- **Collaborating States Initiative – Teacher Practice Resource page** – an index of resources, including resources for SEL content-alignment, guidance on instructional best practices, and SEL assessment resources. The index also provides a variety of downloadable SEL lesson plans and student activities. For more information, visit <https://casel.org/csi-resources-teacher-practices> or <https://casel.org/csi-resources>
- **For additional information on evidence-based SEL programs and curricula**, please see the **CASEL Program Guide**. For more information, visit <https://casel.org/guide>

For additional resources and information concerning Harmony SEL, please see the resources provided below:

- Additional information and guidance on Harmony “Meet Up” activities can be found at <https://online.harmonysel.org/meet-up-overview>
- Additional information and guidance on “Buddy Up” activities can be found at <https://online.harmonysel.org/buddy-up-overview>
- Harmony “Quick Connection Cards” are available at <https://online.harmonysel.org/quick-connection-cards>
- For additional information on Harmony lessons, visit <https://online.harmonysel.org>

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