

## SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the development of skills or competencies that help us “feel” and positively relate to one another. This learning can take place at home, in schools and in the community and will not only help promote children’s well-being and success in life now, but will also equip them with lifelong tools to foster well-being. On the MDI, social and emotional competencies are measured by asking children about their levels of optimism, empathy, prosocial behaviour, self-esteem, happiness, sadness, worries and self-regulation. For grade 7, the MDI also includes questions about responsible decision-making, self-awareness, perseverance, assertiveness, citizenship, and social responsibility.

- optimism
- empathy
- prosocial behaviour
- self-esteem
- happiness
- sadness
- worries
- self-regulation
- responsible decision-making
- self-awareness
- perseverance
- assertiveness
- citizenship
- social responsibility

## research

### In the short-term, SEL is linked to:

- Positive attitudes towards oneself, others and school
- Confidence, persistence and a sense of purpose
- Positive social behaviours with adults and peers
- Decreased behavioural issues and risky behaviour
- Increased school success

### In the long-term, SEL is linked to:

- Better chance of high school graduation
- Readiness for post-secondary education
- Career success
- Positive family and work relationships
- Reduced criminal behaviour
- Better mental health
- Engaged citizenship

(see Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovitch, & Gullotta, 2015).



**SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

A complete list of action ideas resources can be downloaded at [discovermdi.ca/resources](https://discovermdi.ca/resources)

at home

- Be a good listener. Invite your children to talk to you about their feelings without offering judgment or unsolicited advice.
- Strong emotional reactions from children require calm and caring responses rather than threats or punishments. Parental warmth helps children calm down so that they are better able to self-regulate, whereas trying to impose control on children’s behaviour impairs self-regulation. Allowing them to solve their own problems also promotes self-regulation.
- Practice self-care and self-kindness so you can be your best self with your children.
- Model gratitude for your children by regularly saying the things you are thankful for, such as nature, family, friends, and food.

in school

- Greet each student every day as they come into class so you can notice how they doing.
- Remember that SEL isn’t a program - it’s a way of classroom life. A classroom focused on SEL is one where teachers provide a safe environment for students, use instruction as a tool to develop working relationships between peers, increase engagement, and allows students to develop and practice using their social and emotional skills.
- Take part in a program to promote teacher and staff social and emotional well-being, such as CARE or SMART-in-Education
- Increase opportunities for parent-teacher interactions. Connecting with parents, and sharing with them what social and emotional skills are being taught in school will help emphasize the learning taking place. The more settings in a child’s life that promote SEL, the more opportunities the child will have to practice and develop SEL behaviours.

in the community

- Check in with kids each day to see how they are feeling. Try to recognize and help them name their specific feelings rather than a generalized state, such as irritated, distracted, or unmotivated instead of simply bored.
- Have children participate in creating after-school program agreements of how they would like the group to run including behaviour expectations and problem solving.
- Provide training for after-school staff on how to model social and emotional competencies.
- Give kids a break! Introduce stress management techniques, such as listening to calming music, progressive muscle relaxation, or breathing techniques.

Good indicators of children's overall health:

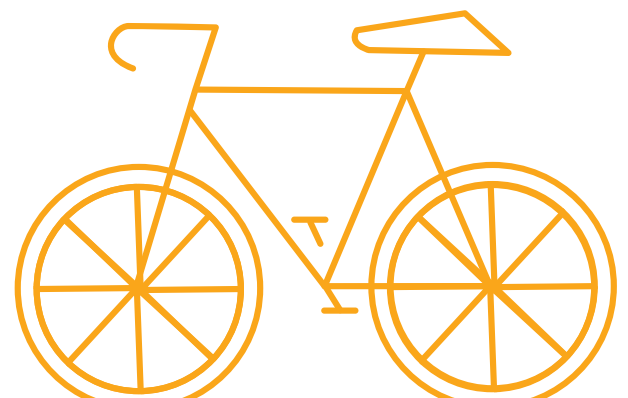
- enjoy healthy food
- healthy food
- eat breakfast
- daily breakfast

## PHYSICAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

The MDI asks children about six key areas that research shows are good indicators of children's overall health: frequency of breakfast, frequency of good sleep, frequency of junk food consumption, frequency of family meals, body image, and children's perceptions about their overall general health. Children in the middle years who feel healthy are more likely to be engaged in school, have a feeling of connectedness with their teachers, perform better academically, and are less likely to be bullied or bully others.

## research

- Students who eat breakfast more frequently do better in school, and breakfast is especially important for children who are undernourished (Adolphus et al., 2013). Children who eat breakfast are also more likely to have a healthier diet in general (Deshmukh-Taskar et al., 2010).
- Children ages 5 to 13 need 9-11 hours of uninterrupted sleep a night (Canadian Sleep Duration Recommendations, 2016). Children who do not get enough sleep are more likely to have troubles at school, be involved in family disagreements, and display symptoms of depression (Smaldone, Honig, & Byrne, 2007).
- Because of changes in the brain that take place around the time of puberty, children are more strongly attracted to junk foods that contain high amounts of fat and sugar than adults. Overconsumption of junk food affects cognitive function, memory and puts children at increased risk of developing psychiatric disorders later on, whether they show weight gain or not (Reicht, 2016).
- Frequently eating meals together as a family is related to increased self-esteem and school success and decreased chances of developing eating disorders, substance abuse, violent behaviour and symptoms of depression (Harrison et al., 2015).
- Middle childhood is an important time in which children form lasting viewpoints about their bodies as they become increasingly self-aware and self-conscious, comparing themselves to others. Having a healthy body image is strongly linked to healthy self-esteem in both boys and girls (van den Berg et al., 2010). Being satisfied with one's body during middle childhood can also prevent eating disorders (Flament et al., 2012).



PHYSICAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

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at home

- Talk to kids about their health and well-being. Let them know that their health and well-being includes not just how they are feeling physically, but also how they're feeling emotionally and socially. Check in frequently to find out how your child feels about his or her health.
- Model a healthy body image for your child. Children often adopt similar attitudes towards their own bodies as those demonstrated by their parents, and are likely to engage in body-changing behaviours if they see their parents doing so (Gattario et al., 2014).
- Create a set bedtime routine with a regular bed and wake time. Do quiet activities to prepare the body for sleep like having a bath, gentle stretching, or listening to relaxing music, guided visualization or an audio book. Avoid screen time and homework 2 hours before bed. Remove screens and media devices from bedrooms.

in school

- Encourage children to keep a daily health journal in which they reflect on how they are feeling physically, emotionally and socially. Brainstorm ideas as a class of ways to stay healthy in each of these areas.
- Help students have a great night's sleep by limiting the amount of time they spend sitting in the classroom. Have standing workspaces, offer movement breaks, and include time for vigorous physical activity each day.
- Team up with a community sponsor to host a breakfast club where kids who don't have time for or can't afford breakfast can have a healthy meal before school starts. School breakfast programs have been shown to improve students' academic performance, especially in mathematics and in particular for students who are undernourished (Adolphus et al., 2013).

in the community

- Offer separate programs for boys and girls in which they can discuss body image issues among themselves. Boys and girls tend to experience body image dissatisfaction in different ways and may feel more comfortable speaking about the topic separately.
- Ensure that after-school programs make having a healthy body image a priority, especially programs that may unintentionally promote self-criticism towards one's appearance, such as team sports, swimming, and dance.
- Consider creating, joining, or aligning work with any food security networks in your town or region. These networks can help ensure families have access to affordable food options and increase awareness of barriers to healthy shopping and eating.

Aspects related to children's satisfaction with life:

- belonging
- security
- consistency
- listening
- empathy
- friendship skills

## CONNECTEDNESS

Connectedness is a fundamental need of children and is a protective asset that has the strongest association with children's health and well-being. Close social relationships and a sense of belonging with adults and peers at home, in school and in the community cultivate important connections. Having even just one adult who cares about them, listens to them and believes in them can make a powerful difference in a child's life.

Middle childhood (ages 9 to 12) is a time in which healthy peer relationships become very important. Equally important to well-being and healthy development is feeling connected to parents and caregivers. Having many strong and supportive social connections can help minimize other risks in a child's life and their lifelong well-being

## research

- A study of the MDI results of more than 5000 Canadian students found that having a sense of belonging among one's peers and a supportive relationship with adults at home and school were the most important aspects related to children's satisfaction with life, even more so than family income or personal health (Gadermann et al., 2015).

### WITH ADULTS

- Supportive relationships children have with the adults in their school and community offer protection from the harmful effects of stress and improve self-esteem. Children with close relationships with adults experience fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression and show less problem behaviour (Guhn et al., 2016).
- Teachers who emphasize progress goals, personal mastery and self-motivation foster greater respectful and positive peer environments (Wang et al., 2016)

### WITH PEERS

- Social competencies and friendship building skills can buffer children against victimization, anxiety and depression (Schonert and Hymel, 2013).
- Children who do not feel part of a group or feel cast out by their own group are at risk of anxiety and depression. They are also at higher risk of low school attendance and future school drop-out. (Viega et al., 2014)

### WITH FAMILY

- Emotional attunement between the parent and child continues to be important through middle childhood and adolescence as it buffers against risks and promotes well-being. When parents provide a secure, supportive and reliable home base, their children tend to have fewer behaviour and emotional difficulties (Oldfield et al., 2016).



## CONNECTEDNESS

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### at home

- Ask children: “What do you love the most about our family? What family activities do you enjoy the most? What do you want our family to do more of?”
- When children show problem behaviors, it is helpful if caregivers focus on regulating their own emotions first so that they do not act out of anger or frustration. Recognize that children need caring and comfort when they are struggling and acting out. Respond with sensitivity and constructive boundary setting rather than punishment.
- Create family traditions and a strong cultural identity. Take part in community celebrations while exploring openness towards other cultures.
- Engage in creative play that your child initiates. By giving them your time and your full undivided attention, you may get to know their perspective and needs.

### in school

- Ask students: “What are the three things that adults in the school do to show that they respect and believe in you? What are three things that you wish they would do?”
- Teachers who have optimistic views of their students and provide encouragement can positively impact students’ performance.
- When students feel shame, it shuts down their learning. If students are acting out, practice empathy and ask students how they are feeling. Find out what else is going on in their lives that might be affecting their behaviour, and show that you care.
- Create a consistent way to check in with each student on a regular basis. For example, spend 2 minutes per day for 10 days connecting one-on-one with a student.

### in the community

- Ask children: “When and where after school do you feel most like yourself and proud to be you?”
- Model empathy, helping and sharing behaviours in community programs to increase your participants’ peer acceptance. If you are unconditionally kind and understanding to all students regardless of their behaviour, their peers are likely to follow your lead.
- Ensure community opportunities are inclusive to all children and families by providing universal programming.
- Promote programs and services in your community that offer opportunities for mentorship. Consider Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the YWCA/YMCA, local peer mentor programs, and cultural organizations.

High quality after school programs provide:

- choice
- connectedness
- mastery
- inclusivity
- passion
- creativity
- supportive environment

## AFTER SCHOOL TIME

How children spend their after-school time can have a considerable impact upon well-being, including positive personal and social development, feelings of connectedness at school, academic success and reduced behavioural concerns. A healthy balance of structured after-school programs, social opportunities and physical activity as well as play and rest are important for children’s thriving and resilience.

After school time, between 3pm and 6pm, is known as the “critical hours” because it is during this time children are most often left unsupervised. It’s an awkward time for many families when there is a mismatch between the end of the school day and the end of the work day.

## research

- All after school opportunities are not equal and it matters how an activity is done – often a happy mood and enthusiastic mentor make all the difference. When youth are passionately engaged and motivated in activities, whether arts, physical exercise or service activities, children develop improved brain development, social competence and academic success (Diamond, 2014).
- Participating in meaningful after-school activities can help children build their capacity to overcome adversity and manage stress, boosting their resilience. (Li et al, 2015).
- Challenging and enjoyable after school activities can improve youth’s ability to reason and problem solve, exercise choice and discipline, and be creative and flexible. These abilities are strong predictors of academic, career and life success. As well, they are greatly hindered when children are lonely, sad, stressed or not physically fit. (Diamond, 2014).
- Quiet reflection time and daydreaming is just as essential to brain health and development as active and focused activities (Immordino-Yang, 2012).
- When a child has a long lasting relationship with a caring adult, rather than many temporary supports, the opportunity for a more meaningful connection is fostered.



## AFTER SCHOOL TIME

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### at home

- Ask, "Is there a club, program or team that you feel a positive sense of belonging?" If nowhere, begin to explore what they need from you to be able to participate in a meaningful after school experience.
- Ask children what types of after school activities they would like to take part in. If they are not offered in your community, reach out to your school or community centre to suggest the activity.
- Plan ahead to avoid barriers – find out about subsidies and transit/carpool options at your school or community program.
- Choose activities that reduce stress and loneliness, improve health and that make them happier and more connected. Consider arts, athletics and service opportunities.

### in school

- Ask, "What is your school already doing well to help you and your friends with interesting after-school activities?" Then make a commitment to continue to do so.
- Focus encouragement on effort and perseverance, not performance and abilities.
- Allow children who struggle with school attendance to suggest their favourite activity for an after-school program or team. Coordinate with community programming to offer space in your school to reduce barriers to participation, improve their attendance and school connectedness.
- Organize volunteers to pick up students at school and walk them to nearby programs so that kids whose parents cannot pick them up can also participate in after-school activities
- Invite students to share their out-of-school experiences with classmates and integrate their new interests and skills into classroom learning.

### in the community

- Ask, "What after-school activities are your friends doing that you would like to participate in?"
- Look at the MDI to see what is preventing children in your community from attending after-school programs and find solutions to address these barriers.
- Provide training for community program leaders in modelling and promoting social and emotional skills in children.
- Evaluate programs for their ability to foster a sense of autonomy, belonging and competence.



Benefits of a positive school climate:

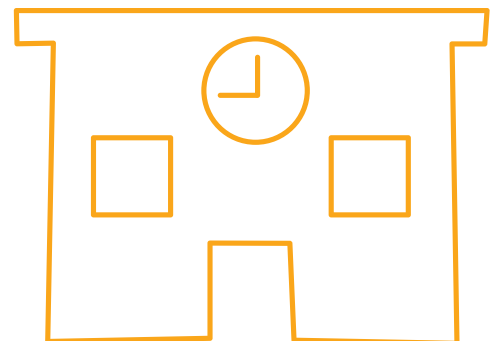
- motivation
- belonging
- engagement in learning
- resilience
- kindness
- positive outlook

## SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

A child’s school experiences are a critical predictor for their personal well-being and academic success. When children have positive experiences at school they are more likely to feel they belong within their school, feel more motivated and engaged in class and achieve higher academic performance. The MDI asks children about their perceptions related to: academic self-concept, school climate, school belonging and experiences with peer victimization. Additionally, the Grade 7 MDI includes questions about motivation and future goals. Children’s responses related to these concepts help adults understand what types of experiences children are having within their schools, and can direct adults to know the best ways to provide a safe, caring, and supportive environment where all children can thrive.

## research

- Children with a positive view of their academic abilities tend to have greater motivation and goals for the future. Children and adolescents who attend schools that are focused on developing all aspects of the child (academic, social, and emotional) feel more positive about school, achieve at higher levels, are more likely to graduate and are more likely to succeed in college (Darling-Hammond, 2015).
- Feelings of belonging are associated with lower emotional distress, the reduction of negative behaviours (such as bullying and mental health issues) and are associated to rates of higher resilience later in life (van Harmelen et al., 2016).
- Teaching prosocial behaviors (such as empathy, sharing, cooperation) allows a school to build a system built upon principles of respect, responsibility, fairness, and honesty. Within such systems, desirable behaviors increase and students feel safe. Discipline is approached using restorative measures, teaching social problem solving, rather than resorting to damaging punitive measures (Bear, Whitcomb, Elias, & Blank, 2015).
- Children’s perception of kindness within a school is a consistent indicator of positive school climate. Students who see kind behaviours in students, teachers, and staff also describe their school environments as being safe and encouraging places to learn (Binfet, Gadermann, & Schonert-Reichl, 2015).
- The development of social competencies is crucial to a child’s well-being. Children who exhibit prosocial behaviours, such as kindness and altruism, are more likely to have friends and feel a sense of belonging. They are also less likely to be victimized (Guhn, Schonert-Reichl, Gaddermand, Hymel, & Hertzman, 2013).



## SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

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### at home

- Ask your child to describe the qualities of their school that support their well-being and develop a sense of community. Then discuss with your child ways to build relationships with their teachers, peers, and other people within the school community.
- Develop an action plan with your child that outlines the ways that they can (and wish to) become more involved in their school community.
- Use restorative practices, such as the collaborative problem-solving approach, when teaching consequences to your child so that they can maintain a sense of social connectedness while taking responsibility for their actions.
- Practice prosocial behaviour yourself – your example of kind, inclusive behaviour towards others will serve as a powerful source of inspiration to your child about the types of skills they are learning in school that promote a sense of community.
- Check in with your child’s teacher and school on a regular basis. Let them know that you are invested in the school community. If available, volunteer for school functions.

### in school

- With students, create a classroom or schoolwide constitution that outlines the values they feel are important when creating a classroom or school environment where everyone is welcome and all can learn. Questions to consider during this dialogue may include:
  - What rules and values do we agree to follow as a class this year?
  - How can we help one another keep these values and maintain an environment of respect and community?
  - How can we ensure everyone in our class feels respected and included?
  - How will we restore community and respect in our classroom if challenges need to be addressed?
- Provide faculty, caregivers, and community with training on how to develop connection with each other and students.
- Notice the messages your school environment may be providing children about the school climate. Is the school trophy case the first thing you see when you walk in the school door? What message does this send to students?

### in the community

- Ask children how they want to contribute to their community. Every child has something to offer others and can gain a sense of competence, belonging and mastery when they are able to make an impact in an area they care about.
- Create an action plan in collaboration with your local school to support the needs of your community. Identify the areas that your community organization can address to help support greater community connection and the development of a positive community climate.
- Negative peer experiences often occur out of sight of adults, including during after-school times. After-school program and activity staff should be trained about how to create a positive peer climate. Being able to identify children’s vulnerabilities should be a focus of training, such as recognizing when children are stressed, socially victimized or experiencing trauma.

Key indicators for Well-being Index:

- optimism
- happiness
- self-Esteem
- absence of sadness
- general health

Assets in Asset Index:

- otimism
- happiness
- self-esteem
- absence of sadness

## ASSETS, WELL-BEING & RESILIENCE

The MDI results help us better understand well-being and the individual assets that foster healthy development in all the environments where children spend their time. There are also two summary measures for an overall picture of how children perceive their lives: the MDI Well-being Index shows how well children are thriving in the middle years and the MDI Assets Index highlights the quantity and quality of positive resources and influences present in their lives. Using the MDI data as a guide, we can impact children’s well-being by helping them build their social and emotional skills and enriching their assets.

## research

### What are assets?

Assets are resources present in children’s lives, such as supportive relationships and enriching activities. Using a strength-based approach, the MDI Assets Index measures key assets that help promote children’s positive development and well-being. These assets were carefully chosen based on research that shows they promote resilience and well-being (Schonert-Reichl et al. 2013). They are also malleable, meaning they can be changed and adapted with various levels of effort. Developing these assets has the potential to affect great change in a child’s life.

### Assets lead to well-being

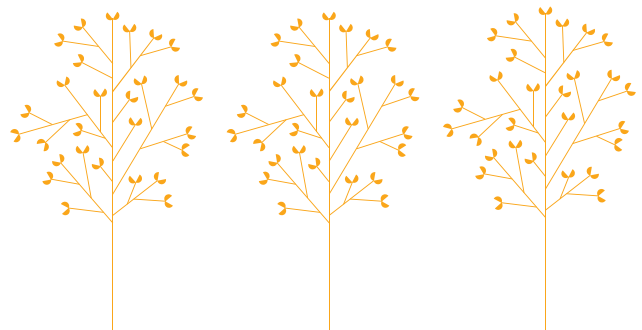
One of the key findings of the MDI, consistent across all participating school districts, is that children’s self-reported well-being is related to the number of assets they perceive as being present in their lives. As the number of assets increases, children are more likely to report higher well-being (Gadermann et al., 2015; Guhn et al., 2012).

### What is resilience?

People sometimes refer to resilience as “beating the odds;” resilience means experiencing well-being and healthy development even in the face of great challenges (Sapienza & Masten, 2011). Resilience involves many interactions that includes individual characteristics, histories of children and their environmental supports (Ungar, 2015). This means that resilience is unique to each child and context. It is also malleable - constantly changing and developing based on the individual context each child experiences.

### Well-being leads to resilience

Just as an increase in assets predicts higher levels of well-being, similarly, higher levels of well-being often promote resilience (Ungar, 2015). One’s ability to bounce back from adversity is often related to their well-being. For example, when children have a supportive adult relationship (asset) they often report higher levels of self-esteem (well-being indicator), which consequently leads to their ability to better adapt and cope with challenges (resilience).



ASSETS, WELL-BEING & RESILIENCE

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at home

- Ask your child about how the relationships in their life are going. Listen to them as they share with you their experiences about peers and adults at school that matter. Provide them support and help them identify those that they can reach out to if they need more support at school or in other areas of their life.
- Help children develop skills for initiating and maintaining healthy relationships with peers and other adults in their lives, such as awareness, empathy, kindness, and assertiveness.
- Help your family members develop a “growth mindset.” A growth mindset helps us see that challenges give us an opportunity to grow, and builds a sense of resilience and positive outlook for the future.

in the community

- Solicit youth and their families in the development of services that are responsive to their needs. Provide autonomy for youth to have an active voice in decision-making about what services are meaningful and relevant for them.
- Evaluate whether supports across schools, communities, and home complement each other. Community organizations and agencies can work collectively towards a shared vision aligned with what is required to best support youth to thrive. Avoid service silos, which create redundant programming.
- Consider all social contexts that influence development, such as culture and peer influences. Provide skill-building opportunities for youth to reach their goals with inclusive structures and positive social norms.

in school

- Provide students with lessons or units that focus on identifying assets and developing well-being and resilience. Guiding questions for lessons may include:
  - How do we know when we are doing well?
  - How can we support each other and who can we turn to when we need support?
  - How do I take care of my body? How does it make me feel?
  - What are my hobbies and passions, and why is important for me to explore them?
  - What can I do when things get difficult? How can I overcome challenges?
- Insights learned from discussing these questions with students can increase awareness of where children may need additional support. Such support may include providing additional lessons on a specific topic, connecting with the caregiver of a child who needs additional support, or putting caregivers in touch with professional services to help provide the needed assets in a child’s life.