



Making the Case for Social and Emotional Learning at RELCs

While there exist several leading frameworks and theories related to youth's development of the skills and attitudes necessary for success in school, work, and life, including 21st Century Skills, emotional intelligence, and character development, social and emotional learning (SEL) is a term that has gained popularity and use in recent years, particularly in formal education.

The [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL) defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” CASEL's framework classifies SEL competencies into five areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

As one of the leading institutions championing both research and practice in SEL, CASEL has become a primary driver for its implementation in the nation's schools. By design, Residential Environmental Learning Centers (RELCs) have a unique relationship with formal education. Their programs are typically supportive of classroom instruction, viewed as an extension of the school day, and in most cases, their primary clients are classroom teachers and school district personnel who, along with parents and student guardians, demand that greater attention be paid to social and emotional skills throughout the education experience.

Furthermore, RELCs make a significant contribution to the field by expanding the context of SEL to include the rest of the natural world. The CASEL framework is strongly aligned with the [North American Association for Environmental Education's](#) definition of environmental education as “a process that helps individuals, communities, and organizations learn more about the environment, develop skills to investigate their environment and to make intelligent, informed decisions about how they can, individually and with others, help take care of it.” Environmental literacy requires more than scientific knowledge; experiences that are grounded in sound SEL practices provide youth with the skills needed to make a difference in their world as future environmental stewards. In order to prepare for and respond to the increasingly complex threats to our natural world, students must be able to collaborate, reflect, think critically, demonstrate empathy, and make responsible decisions. With intentional incorporation of SEL, students depart RELCs better in tune with themselves, their peers, and their place in the world.

For the field of residential environmental education (EE) to remain relevant, it is essential that we develop an understanding of SEL, strive to incorporate research-based best practices, and articulate RELCs' unique value and contribution to the growing awareness of how best to support young people's development.

What Exactly is a RELC?

While details may vary across organizations depending on their unique circumstances, there are several key qualities that help define whether programs are classified as RELCs:

- Students stay onsite overnight, with most programs lasting 3-5 days in length
- Programming occurs almost exclusively outdoors, although classroom or laboratory space may be utilized to support field experiences
- The experience is centered around being in a natural setting; many program sites exist within a national, state, or county park, or other protected area
- Desired program outcomes typically include environmental literacy, responsible environmental behavior, stewardship, conservation, or a similar concept focused on student development of a deeper understanding of humans' relationship with and responsibility toward the natural world
- Learning is largely experiential and hands-on, utilizing inquiry-based approaches where students are encouraged to ask questions, make observations, and conduct investigations of natural phenomena
- Students share sleeping accommodations, meals, and other common spaces with their peers and chaperones (which, in many cases, include their teachers)
- Program providers work primarily with teachers or school administrators to arrange trip logistics and prepare students (and their guardians) for their program
- Participants enroll as a group, versus individually; in most cases, they arrive having some familiarity with one another through school or a club

Many components of residential life can support SEL without intentional design; the tools and resources below can help program leaders intentionally create opportunities for students to practice their SEL competencies and skills. Strengthened social bonds, increased self-efficacy, advances in self-management, opportunities for responsible decision-making are just some of the likely outcomes of the residential learning environment.

Why RELCs?

RELC settings are conducive to developing students' self-confidence, communication skills, and responsible decision-making, along with other SEL-related outcomes. In addition to the opportunities for supporting SEL during field practice, in the residential setting, and by systems embedded into organizational context, all of which are addressed in this toolkit, there exist two additional foundational components conducive to social and emotional growth that are unique to the RELC environment: a novel learning environment in a natural setting.

Novel Environment

The very act of leaving home and a familiar classroom significantly alters the learning environment, while at the same time facilitating new perspectives on learning, relationships, and day-to-day life. This novel learning environment offers the opportunity for students to better understand themselves, and reimagine their relationships to peers and teachers. Students who struggle in the classroom setting often shine at RELCs, demonstrating competencies unseen in the classroom, which provides them with critical experience in building a positive identity as a learner. Likewise, learning, eating, and sleeping in shared accommodations outside of the classroom allows students to build social awareness, find commonalities with peers, break up negative social dynamics that may exist in the classroom or school environment, and strengthen relationships through shared experiences. Program elements that include collaborative group work, scientific investigations, scaffolded physical challenges, and opportunities to reflect contribute to the positive impact on social and emotional development.

Natural Setting

Numerous studies support the concept of humans' innate connection and affinity to the natural world (Wilson, 1984; Rozak, 1992; Orr, 2004); many others promote the benefits of time spent outdoors (Gill, 2014), from positive impacts on health and wellness to demonstration of more productive behaviors, including better self-control and fewer problematic or disruptive behaviors. Richard Louv, who introduced the concept of "nature-deficit disorder," describes the costs of disconnection from nature as "diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses, a rising rate of myopia, child and adult obesity, and Vitamin D deficiency, among other maladies" (Suttie, 2016). Even medical doctors are increasingly prescribing time in nature for stress reduction, attention restoration, weight reduction, reduced blood pressure, and a host of other benefits (Klass, 2016).

Today's kids spend less time outdoors than previous generations, however, and there is growing concern about the long-term impacts on youth and the ecosystem as a result of this disconnection—or even alienation—from nature. RELCs offer a rich environment for youth and adults to connect (or reconnect) to nature through both structured and unstructured learning environments. Field instructors skillfully guide students to connect to nature through modeling, intentionally sequenced activities, and free-choice time to explore and play in nature. RELCs create safe opportunities for students to observe, reflect, contemplate, and interact with the natural world in order to develop authentic and positive connections to nature, which might be expressed as seeing the beauty in the sunrise, feeling a sense of contentment listening to a babbling stream, breathing in the scent of a pine forest, or having fun with friends while investigating the mineral composition of sand on the beach.

Why Now?

This work could not be more important or timely; educational experts agree that social and emotional skills are essential to success in school, the workplace, and in life (Durlak et al., 2011). While SEL has risen in prominence in formal education and out-of-school settings, it has not been articulated in the field of residential EE or within RELC program settings until now.

It's clear that personal and interpersonal development matter; nearly 50% of RELCs around the country list program outcomes related to development of skills such as teamwork and leadership (Ardoin et al., 2015). Yet, as a field, we have lacked a common message or purpose for those claims. In the early stages of toolkit development, conversations with program leaders indicated that few sites, if any, were intentionally supporting SEL, and rarely was this done from a research-based approach. Similar to many "off the shelf" SEL curriculums in which classroom teachers are asked to squeeze lessons or activities between other subject areas, many of the informal educators surveyed demonstrated a belief that team-building was a specific activity rather than a pedagogical approach.

Many SEL leaders now call for a more integrated approach, because all learning is social and emotional. Effective SEL instruction requires that teachers develop positive relationships with their students, foster supportive and inclusive learning environments, incorporate intentional and explicit instruction of SEL skills, and attend to their own social and emotional development. Additionally, this work does not happen in isolation. Schools that embrace a fully embedded approach to SEL implementation—including, but not limited to an emphasis on relationships between colleagues, positive school climate, and an approach to discipline that favors restorative versus punitive practices—in addition to focusing on teaching strategies report stronger gains in student outcomes and increased teacher satisfaction.

Students typically attend a RELC for three to five days. Each day presents the potential for sustained immersive focus on experiences that build SEL skills. When one considers the estimated 300-500 residential EE organizations across the nation, the potential to positively impact over 1,000,000 students served annually by our field is tremendous.

References

General:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21291449>

<https://schoolguide.casel.org/what-is-sel/equity-and-sel/>

Ardoyn, N. M., Biedenweg, K., & O'Connor, K. (2015). Evaluation in Residential Environmental Education: An Applied Literature Review of Intermediary Outcomes. *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, 14(1), 43–56

Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432.

Natural Settings:

Gill, T. (2014). The benefits of children's engagement with nature: A systematic literature review. *Children Youth and Environments*, 24(2), 10-34.

Klass, P. (2018). Writing Prescriptions to Play Outdoors. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/well/writing-prescriptions-to-play-outdoors.html>

Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

Orr, D. W. (2004). *Earth in mind: On education, environment, and the human prospect*. Island Press.

Rozak, T. (1992). *The Voice of the Earth*. Simon and Schuster.

Suttie, J. (2016). How to Protect Kids from Nature-Deficit Disorder. Retrieved from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_protect_kids_from_nature_deficit_disorder

Wilson, E.O. (1984). *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press.

Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship by Ming Kuo, Michael Barnes and Catherine Jordan. (*Frontiers in Psychology*, Mini Review, 2019, p.5). Here are three (of many) relevant findings it highlights: "Problematic and disruptive behaviors such as talking out of turn or pushing among children are less frequent in natural settings than in the classroom (Bassette and Taber-Doughty, 2013; Nedovic and Morrissey, 2013; O'Hare et al., 2013; Chawla et al., 2014). Further, in greener learning environments, students who previously experienced difficulties in traditional classrooms are better able to remove themselves from conflicts and demonstrate better self-control (Maynard et al., 2013; Ruiz-Gallardo et al., 2013; Swank et al., 2017) . . . Indeed, learning in greener settings has been consistently tied to the bridging of both sociocultural differences and interpersonal barriers (e.g. personality conflicts) that can interfere with group functioning in a classroom (White, 2012; Cooley et al, 2014; Warver et al., 2015).