

## INTRODUCTION

# S4L: Skills for Life (GLC 20)

Welcome and thank you for your interest in Skills4Life.

**Skills for Life (S4L)** helps students build on their existing strengths and strategies to enhance skills they can use throughout their lives. Skills related to, for example, effective communication with others and coping with stress, are especially important in the workplace. This resource is a series of five, 60-minute lesson plans designed to be used within the grade 10 Career Studies course, where all lessons align with the Ontario Curriculum. The content is solidly grounded in research about social and emotional skill development and has been vetted by practicing teachers, clinicians, youth and a culturally-responsive review team. S4L has been field-tested with Ontario Career Studies teachers who have helped to ensure that the material is relevant and easy to use.

## Background for S4L

**School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON)** works together with Ontario school boards to support student mental health. Ensuring that all students have access to high-quality mental health promotion and prevention programming is a key priority. To this end, SMH-ON selects, adapts, and tests evidence-informed approaches that can be easily integrated within daily school life. S4L is an example of this. It is rooted in research, and designed to fit within grade ten Career Studies, potentially reaching a sizeable number of students as part of regular school practice.

In 2013, a strong partnership was formed with two organizations with similar goals for introducing social emotional learning skills (SEL) systematically into Ontario classrooms. The **Social Research and Demonstration Corporation** (SRDC) reviewed relevant research in this area and worked with SMH-ON to develop a program of research related to secondary school SEL. The Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario joined the partnership to lead the adaptation of an existing program, *Healthy Transitions*, for use within grade ten classrooms.

Early pilots were conducted within **Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board**, and later field-tests occurred in seven additional schools across regions of the province, in English and in French. Results from these field-tests, and additional evidence reviews by SRDC, inspired the need for an updated program for a final round of testing prior to province-wide scale-up.

In response to Ontario educators’ request for curriculum-aligned materials to support instruction related to mental health and social emotional learning skills development within Career Studies, SMH-ON developed a plan of action with the **Ontario Secondary Schools Teacher Federation** (OSSTF) to further refine this SEL resource for the classroom. A writing team of practicing Career Studies Teachers, Occasional Teachers, and Professional Support Services Personnel drew on foundational materials to create this revised resource, S4L. Reviewers from OSSTF and **Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association** (OECTA) and the **ThriveSMH** student reference group helped to finalize the resource for the second field test conducted in 2022-2023.

## Curriculum Connections + chart (Intro word doc)

This unit has been developed to be embedded into the revised 2019 Career Studies Course (GLC20) and align with the following overall curriculum expectations:

- **Strand A. Developing the Skills, Strategies, and Habits Needed to Succeed**

This strand outlines student learning about the skills, strategies, and habits that will contribute to long-term individual success and well-being. Students will develop decision-making strategies and apply them throughout the course. They will also focus on skills and strategies that support adaptability and resilience.

- **Strand B. Exploring and Preparing for the World of Work**

Students explore the changing nature of work and the transferable skills they need to pursue work opportunities, with a focus on opportunities in key growth areas. They investigate how digital media use, and a social media presence can influence their career/life opportunities. They assess and reflect on their own skills, values, and interests, developing a personal profile and taking it into account in their education and career/life planning, and they explore opportunities within their own communities and beyond.

- **Strand C. Planning and Financial Management to Help Meet Postsecondary Goals**

In this strand, students apply information gathered throughout the course to set a goal (or goals) for their first year after secondary school. They develop an initial plan for fulfilling their goal(s), and then consolidate their discoveries and learning by preparing various materials related to applying for a job, internship, apprenticeship, scholarship, education or training program, or other next step of their choice. Learning in this strand develops students’ financial literacy, teaching them about the importance of responsible management of financial resources. Among other things, they learn about the different forms of saving and borrowing and the risks and benefits associated with each as they create a budget for their first year after secondary school.



Lesson	Core Content	SEL Skill	Curriculum Links	Learning Goals
<b>Lesson 1</b> <b>Promoting</b> <b>Mattering for Self</b> <b>and Others</b>	Exploring the importance of mattering to self and others	Self-awareness and sense of identity  Positive motivation and perseverance skills	A.1.1 A 1.2 B.1.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to demonstrate an understanding of mattering and its connection to well-being</li> <li>to practice skills that contribute to creating a positive and inclusive culture that promotes mattering for oneself and others</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 2</b> <b>Exploring</b> <b>Identity and</b> <b>Acknowledging</b> <b>Strengths</b>	Exploring the importance of self-awareness and strengths	Self-awareness and sense of identity	A.1.1 B.2.1 C.1.1 C.1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to identify personal interests, roles, goals, and strengths</li> <li>to connect identified assets/strengths to decision making and personal well-being</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 3</b> <b>Communication</b> <b>and Conflict</b> <b>Resolutions</b>	Exploring the importance of effective communication and conflict resolution	Healthy relationships  Identify and manage emotions	B.1.2 B.1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to develop effective communication skills and understand their importance in personal and professional relationships</li> <li>to apply strategies for resolving conflict in a constructive and respectful manner</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 4</b> <b>Understanding</b> <b>stress and</b> <b>managing</b> <b>transitions</b>	Exploring the importance of understanding transition stress	Identify and manage emotions	A.1.1 A.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to normalize stress related to change</li> <li>To increase knowledge needed to care for well-being during times of transition</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 5</b> <b>Managing stress</b> <b>at school and in</b> <b>the workplace</b>	Exploring the importance of understanding strategies for personal wellness	Stress management and coping with challenges	A.1.1 A.1.2 B.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To increase understanding of how well-being strategies can support future goals</li> <li>To improve understanding of when to seek support</li> </ul>

## Lesson Structure

S4L focuses on equipping students with life skills to help them navigate post-secondary transitions and support their well-being in the process. This unit covers:

- understanding the importance of mattering and positive motivation
- exploring identity and acknowledging our strengths
- learning effective communication and conflict resolution skills
- examining the stress linked to change and transitions and
- identifying strategies to help manage stress

Each lesson is 60 minutes in length and follows a familiar format:

- **Minds On:** an activity for student reflection and activating previous learning or prior knowledge
- **Action Task(s):** engagement with the core content of the lesson
- **Consolidation & wrap up:** questions for students to reflect on the learning, as well as an activity that connects with the student's notebook.

## Student Notebook

The notebook is a tool for students to complete lesson-related activities and to capture their thoughts on the topics covered. The notebook can be printed as a booklet, offered in PDF format or distributed as an individual worksheet. Please note that the notebook is not a handout. It is intended solely for the student's personal reflection.

## Assessment

No formal assessment tools (with the purpose of assigning a mark), are provided. However, the lessons do offer components to help students gauge their learning, such as reflection questions and a list of key learnings. These tools will also support your ongoing assessment strategies as part of the careers curriculum.



## What are Social Emotional Learning Skills?

- **Social emotional development** is a lifelong process that follows predictable stages and can be enhanced through interaction and support.
- **Social emotional skills** help individuals and groups to achieve their goals, build trusting relationships, and cultivate identity and resilience.
- **Social emotional learning categories/competencies** are ways of grouping social emotional skills for instruction. Different organizing systems have been used, but none is deemed to be better than another. In Ontario, six broad categories have been articulated in curriculum. Within each category, educators can prioritize specific social emotional skills based on the strengths, needs, and interests of the students they serve.
- **Social emotional learning** is developmentally appropriate classroom instruction and practice related to social emotional skill-building that centres students and their cultures, identities, lived experiences, and collective well-being. It is designed to help, through co-learning, lifting students' strengths and identity-affirming resources, in developing intra- and interpersonal skills for flourishing throughout life.

**S4L focuses on elements of social emotional learning that can help students with career planning, occupational success, and meeting their goals.**

## Why SEL in the classroom?

Research from countries around the world suggests that SEL yields benefits for both students and teachers when programming is introduced in systematic and focused ways. For example, outcomes of SEL for students include:

- improved positive social development and coping behaviours
- enhanced attitudes toward self, school and others
- improved well-being
- reduced mental health and adjustment problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, aggression)
- improved academic performance and achievement

Studies have also shown that engaging in SEL at school can help to build connections with students and may assist with classroom climate and educator wellness as strategies are modeled and practiced.

Studies have shown that classroom educators are extremely well-positioned to deliver SEL instruction, given their relationship with students. In fact, best outcomes are achieved when SEL is taught by a classroom educator.

**S4L has been aligned with the Career Studies course to help educators to cover these areas in a systematic and relevant manner as part of regular course work.**



## What are some cautions about SEL?

Building skills in SEL at school can yield important mental health, well-being, and academic benefits, but only when this instruction is delivered in culturally relevant and identity-affirming ways. That is, the instruction should be provided within a mentally healthy learning environment that appreciates and celebrates diversity, holds space for a variety of ways of knowing and being, and creates strong emotional safety for every student. Significant and serious concerns have been raised about the impact of SEL on students who are racialized, marginalized, and underserved by the education system when the instruction is biased towards western perspectives and white heteronormative views. Students who experience oppression or racism or do not see themselves reflected in the teaching of SEL may not benefit from this instruction, and in fact may be negatively impacted or harmed.

**Broad issues** for consideration:

- It is important to acknowledge that SEL does not address the larger systemic issues, including racism and oppression, that operate within school systems.
- SEL can be individualistic in nature, and rooted in personal skill development, which may be incompatible with world views that prioritize collectivism and relational approaches, as well as ignoring contextual socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors that influence behaviour.
- SEL without an anti-racist, anti-oppressive approach, runs the risk of perpetuating oppressive structures, reinforcing and centring white, middle-class, cisgender perspectives as normative, and further excluding and disadvantaging racialized and marginalized students.

**S4L has been designed with a culturally responsive, identity-affirming frame of reference.**

SEL from a culturally responsive and identity-affirming lens is focused, developmentally appropriate teaching, instruction, and practice of individual and group social emotional skill building that centres students and their cultures, identities, lived experiences and collective well-being. Through co-learning and lifting of strengths and resources, SEL can offer a range of meaningful strategies for flourishing in school and throughout life when we:

- see students through an asset lens that affirms who they are and experiences they bring to school,
- recognizes different world views and approaches to social emotional development,
- acknowledges the deep impacts of racism, marginalization, and colonialization on student wellness,
- responds with a focus on racial equity, human rights and social justice, and liberation as cornerstones for SEL instruction,
- prioritizes student voice, leadership, and agency



## Implementation tips

When we start early in life and reinforce skills and habits that promote positive socio-emotional skills within caring classroom settings, we can set students up for success and may help to prevent or minimize the burden of future social-emotional challenges.

By embedding opportunities to learn about social and emotional skills in the classroom, both through explicit teaching and through the inclusion of everyday practices, Ontario educators can contribute to the development of positive skills for all students. When young people learn to understand, respect and care for their social and emotional well-being routinely, just as they care for their physical health, they are more likely to reach out for help early if needed.

S4L was designed to be culturally responsive and identity-affirming, but how it is received by each student is dependent upon how it is delivered, and the classroom/school environment into which it is shared. The S4L lesson plans include points of reflection that can help teachers to offer the instruction in a supportive and differentiated manner.

- 1. Know the students in your classroom:** Approaches to all instruction are most impactful when they are mediated through supportive and trusting relationships. Taking time to listen for understanding as you come to know the students - their cultural contexts, lived realities, intersectional identities, and experiences– will help you to tailor the learning to the needs and strengths of the students in your class. This can also help in identifying students who may need extra support with this content because of their personal circumstances. Establishing supportive home-school connections and being prepared with knowledge of board and community services can help when a student needs extra care.
- 2. Mentally healthy learning environments:** A crucial aspect of mentally healthy learning environments is prioritizing an inclusive, culturally responsive, and identity-affirming approach within the learning environment. This includes centring and empowering students' diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, while actively working to dismantle any systems and structures that perpetuate inequities and marginalization. Note that these settings make mental health part of the everyday experience through wellness activities, posters and other visual reminders, and frequent sharing of resources and local supports and services. The [Reflection Tool for Educators on Building a Mentally Healthy Class Community](#) could be a helpful reference in this regard.
- 3. Plan:** While you will use your professional judgement to determine the right time for S4L, important considerations include: allowing for time needed to establish a mentally healthy learning environment with the class; with time that allows for student follow-up (ideally not at the end of the day, or Fridays); being aware of recent events in the school community that would make the topic of the lesson a particularly sensitive one.
- 4. Focus on wellness and facts:** These lessons are intentionally designed to focus on social-emotional skills, mental health and well-being as positive concepts and to support students as they engage in the learning. Research tells us that when mental health literacy is taught in a sensitive and appropriate manner, discussing mental health can have beneficial impacts on students' well-being. Given that the focus of the lessons is on sharing facts and reliable information rather than personal stories, it is helpful to remind students at the beginning of lesson that this is not a forum for disclosures related to mental health. You can suggest that if there is a personal situation a student would like to speak about, they can see you afterwards.



- 5. Seek Support:** As a caring educator, you help create learning environments through which a sense of belonging is fostered, proactive steps are taken to promote positive mental health and support is provided when mental health problems arise. Students experience a range of emotions and having peers, parents/caregivers and other caring adults to connect with can be helpful. Sometimes, more help is needed. There can be stigma regarding seeking mental health support and caring adults play an important role in encouraging students to reach out for professional support when they need it.

