

# Social and Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment

Manual and Guide

Updated February 2022



## Introduction

The **SEL Program Quality Assessment (PQA)** was initially developed when Smith and Peck were both at the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (CYPQ) and subsequently finalised by CYPQ staff. It was designed to be shorter than previous versions of the PQA and more focused on staff practices that are central to SEL skill growth. This manual includes the following section to support successful implementation and understanding of the SEL PQA:

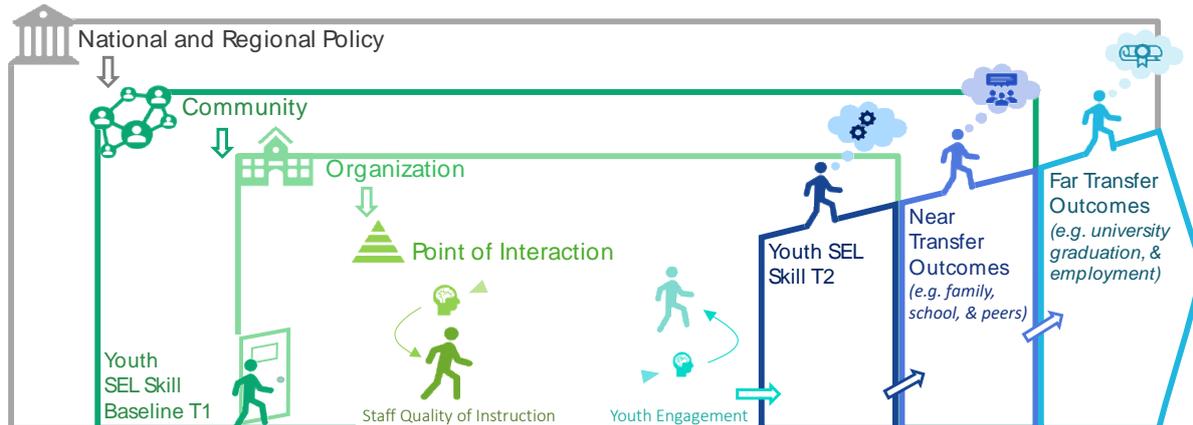
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## Theory of Change

The user guide is based on the Outcomes Framework 2.1 which sets out how youth provision contributes to improvements in outcomes for young people. The Outcomes Framework 2.1 includes a theory of change that details how quality youth provision can lead to socio-emotional development for young people. In summary of Figure 1:

- High-quality staff practices and content offered at the point of interaction, where staff and young people meet during provision, are likely to lead to higher levels of youth engagement during each session or interaction.
- Young people bring with them a set of experiences and beliefs about themselves and the world around them, shaped by the contexts in which they are living and learning. This affects how young people engage with youth provision.
- Over time and multiple interactions, the combination of high-quality staff practices and young people's engagement at the point of interaction promotes the growth of socio-emotional skills.
- With sufficient participation in, and intensity of exposure to, high-quality settings, the effects of socio-emotional skill growth will transfer to other settings.
- This includes the 'near transfer' of socio-emotional skills to family, school, and peers and the 'far transfer' of socio-emotional skills to subsequent life course events or experiences, such as early adulthood health, education, and employment. Young people continue to further apply and grow their socio-emotional skills in these settings.
- Improvement in socio-emotional skills is linked to longer-term impacts including an improved ability to cope with the transition into adulthood, alongside long-term improvements in mental and physical health, educational attainment, sustainable employment, finances, secure housing, positive relationships and personal safety.

**Figure 1: Theory of Change**



## About the PQA

The SEL Programme Quality Assessment (PQA) is an observational rating instrument that was designed to assess the quality of staff *instructional practices* during provision, build a quality-focused programme culture, develop programme improvement goals, identify staff training needs, and provide information about how specific aspects of programme quality relate to specific aspects of young people’s socio-emotional skill growth. Each of the 41 items on the PQA (2019 version) describes three levels of quality related to observable staff practices, with a “1” indicating little or no evidence of the practice, a “3” indicating some evidence of the practice (e.g., the practice was observed but did not occur consistently or applied to only some of the young people), and a “5” indicating that the practice was fully implemented (e.g., the practice occurred consistently and was applied to all of the young people). These items are arranged to produce 10 scale scores (nested within four domains): Creating Safe Spaces (Safe Space); Emotion Coaching, Scaffolding Learning, and Fostering Growth Mindset (Supportive Environment); Fostering Teamwork, Promoting Responsibility and Leadership, and Cultivating Empathy (Interactive Environment); and Furthering Learning, Supporting Youth Interests, and Supporting Plans and Goals (Engaging Environment)<sup>1</sup>.

The SEL PQA was developed through over a decade of collaborative efforts among researchers and practitioners working on several different versions of Program Quality Assessments (PQA; Smith et al., 2012), including sustained conversations among expert practitioners in thousands of programs about (a) what the standards and benchmarks for high-quality services should be and (b) what kinds of program designs are necessary to achieve those high standards and benchmarks (e.g., Smith et al., 2016). Psychometric details, including validity and reliability information, for previous versions of the SEL PQA are available from the Weikart Center (i.e., [cypq.org](http://cypq.org); Peck et al., 2019; and Peck [2019]. Program Quality Assessment [PQA] Reliability and Validity Review). Although detailed information about the validity and reliability of the current version of the SEL PQA is pending, previous results indicate that the SEL PQA, relative to previous versions of the PQA, has improved construct validity (e.g., the ability to distinguish between the scales and domains) and criterion validity (e.g., the ability to predict young people’s socio-emotional skill growth).

### Validity

The available evidence also indicates that the SEL PQA retains its high levels of inter-rater reliability of item scores (i.e., 80% or higher) and shows relatively high levels of internal consistency (alpha) reliability among items corresponding to each of the SEL PQA scales, which have ranged from 0.65 to 0.87 and averaged 0.76.

### Analysis

Scores from the SEL PQA can be added to the Weikart Centre’s Scores Reporter portal and a range of reports extracted to show change. After calculating the four PQA domain scores, this information can be used to inform decisions about future training decisions or provision planning (e.g., organizations with especially low scores in a domain may decide to provide youth workers with training opportunities, or other professional development activities, focused on that

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a staff self-report version of this SEL PQA measure, called the ‘Staff Programme Quality Survey’ (SPQS), that can also be used to assess the quality of staff practices during provision. The 15-item SPQS was developed for use in virtual and one-to-one provision and also produces four domain scores: Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interactive Environment, and Engaging Environment.

domain). If the PQA is also used as both a baseline and follow-up measure, changes in PQA domain scores can be used to assess improvement in provision quality (e.g., by comparing baseline domain scores to follow-up domain scores). Finding evidence of improved PQA scores can support conclusions like (a) our professional development activities appear to have been a good use of our time and, potentially, (b) the reason our provision quality improved is because our staff took advantage of the training opportunities we provided.

## Summary of Items

The SEL PQA Has 4 domains, 10 Scales. This synopsis includes one item from each scale. As shown in the column headers of the table below, the response scale options for each of the items are 1, 3, and 5. The specific meaning of each response scale option differs for the content of each item, but the scale anchors (i.e., 1 & 5) have the same practical meaning (i.e., absence & presence of the practice).

<b>Domain - Safe Space</b>		
<b>Scale - Creating Safe Spaces (6 items), Item - Emotional climate</b>		
<b>1</b>  The emotional climate of the session is predominantly negative (e.g., disrespectful, tense, exclusive, even angry or hostile); negative behaviours, such as rudeness, bragging, insults, “trash talking,” negative gestures or other such actions are not mediated by either young people or staff.	<b>3</b>  The emotional climate of the session is predominantly positive. Negative behaviours are mediated (e.g., countered, curtailed, defused) by staff or young people.	<b>5</b>  The emotional climate is always positive (e.g., mutually respectful, relaxed, equitable; characterized by teamwork, camaraderie, inclusiveness); young people and staff are observed offering encouragement, affirmations, or support to others.
<b>Supportive Environment</b>		
<b>Emotion Coaching (4 items), Acknowledge and validate emotions</b>		
<b>1</b>  Staff do not acknowledge, validate, or name emotions of young people.	<b>3</b>  Staff occasionally acknowledge, validate, and name emotions of young people.	<b>5</b>  Staff consistently acknowledge, validate, and name emotions of young people (e.g., “It seems you are disappointed that you didn’t get the part.”).
<b>Scaffolding Learning (4 items), Staff breaks down tasks</b>		
<b>1</b>  Staff do not break difficult tasks into smaller or simpler steps for young people, or there are no tasks of sufficient difficulty to warrant explaining steps.	<b>3</b>  Staff break down difficult tasks into smaller or simpler steps, but steps are not outlined or explained before they begin.	<b>5</b>  Staff break down difficult tasks into smaller or simpler steps which are outlined or explained to young people before they begin (e.g., steps are explained in sequence; instructions are provided for specific steps; examples of completed steps are shared).
<b>Fostering Growth Mindset (3 items), Staff guide youth in self improvement</b>		
<b>1</b>  Staff do not provide opportunities for young people to participate in teams or small groups.	<b>3</b>  Staff ask young people to attempt to figure out how to improve or correct their work but do not sufficiently allow them to do so (e.g., staff jump in with correct answer before young person has time to respond; when a young person doesn’t know how to improve, staff do not rephrase the question or give a hint).	<b>5</b>  Staff guide or support young people in attempting to figure out for themselves how to improve (e.g., “So, what could you do differently?” “Next time, what could you do to keep yourself focused?”).
<b>Interactive Environment</b>		
<b>Fostering Teamwork (3 items), Small group with active collaboration</b>		
<b>1</b>  Staff do not provide young people with opportunities to be responsible for assigned tasks or activities.	<b>3</b>  Staff provide opportunities for young people to participate in small groups, but the activity doesn’t include active collaboration (e.g., staff assign groups where young people work on individual art projects at the same table; young	<b>5</b>  Staff provide opportunities for young people to participate in small groups that require active collaboration (e.g. working together on a joint project, activities with discussion and planning, interdependent roles, etc.).

people individually earn points for their group).		
<b>Promoting Responsibility and Leadership (5 items), Opportunities to be responsible</b>		
<b>1</b>  Staff do not provide young people with an intentional activity where listening to the stories, experiences, feelings, or viewpoints of others is part of the activity.	<b>3</b>  Staff provide some young people with opportunities to be responsible for assigned tasks or activities.	<b>5</b>  Staff provide all young people with opportunities to be responsible for assigned tasks or activities (e.g., taking attendance, handing out snacks, leading an opening activity).
<b>Cultivating Empathy (4 items), Listening and understanding is sole purpose of activity</b>		
<b>1</b>   Staff do not make, or have young people make, connections between session activities and young people's previous knowledge.	<b>3</b>  Staff provide young people an intentional activity where listening to the stories, experiences, feelings, or viewpoints of others is part of the activity but not its sole focus (e.g., staff have young people discuss and plan what organizations might be open to their community action project).	<b>5</b>  Staff provide young people with an intentional activity where listening, understanding, and acknowledging the personal stories, experiences, feelings, culture, or viewpoints of others is the sole focus of the activity (e.g., staff have young people in small groups share about an experience that shaped their life).
<b>Engaging Environment</b>		
<b>Further Learning (5 items), Connect with previous knowledge</b>		
<b>1</b>  Staff do not provide opportunities for young people to make choices.	<b>3</b>  Staff make connections between session activities and young people's previous knowledge (e.g., "These angles remind me of a baseball field.").	<b>5</b>  Staff have young people make connections between session activities and young people's previous knowledge (e.g., related topics previously studied, "real world" applications or issues. For example, staff ask young people questions like "how does our program gardening project relate to what you learned about river pollution?").
<b>Supporting Youth Interest (3 items), Open ended choice within framework</b>		
<b>1</b>  Staff do not provide opportunities for young people to set goals or make or revise plans for projects or activities.	<b>3</b>  Staff provide opportunities for young people to make at least one choice within the framework of the activities, but the choices are limited to discrete options presented by the staff (e.g., "Pick one of the following topics." "Do it this way or that way.").	<b>5</b>  Staff provide opportunities for young people to make at least one open-ended choice within the framework of the activities (e.g., "Pick any topic." "Use these materials any way you want").
<b>Supporting Plans and Goals (4 items), Multiple opportunities to set goals</b>		
<b>1</b>  Staff do not provide opportunities for young people to set goals or make or revise plans for projects or activities.	<b>3</b>  Staff provide one opportunity for young people (individual or group) to set goals, or make or revise plans for a project or activity (e.g., how to spend their time, how to do a task).	<b>5</b>  Staff provide multiple opportunities for young people (individual or group) to set goals, or make or revise plans for projects and activities (e.g., how to spend their time, how to do a task).

## How and When to Use

The PQA can be used by programme staff as a self-assessment instrument, by trained external assessors as a program evaluation instrument, or both. Where used as a self-assessment instrument, staff in a youth organisation form a self-assessment team that observes one another's practices during provision, takes notes about the observed behavioural evidence, and provides a score on each of the PQA items. After each of the participating instructional staff is observed and scored, the self-assessment team discusses the scores to identify areas in which they are doing well and areas in which there is room for improvement. The self-assessment team should include the site manager and at least two instructional staff.

The PQA self-assessment process can be done at any time during the course of provision. For example, it can be completed once, in the middle of a programme period, to get a general idea about how well staff are implementing best practices. It could also be completed twice: once at the beginning of a programme period, to inform improvement goals and training priorities, and once at the end of a programme period to assess improvements in the quality of instructional practices. The timing and forms (i.e., self-assessment and external assessor) of the PQA process should be determined by the goals of the organisation (e.g., continuous quality improvement, programme evaluation, or both).

The PQA can be used to assess the quality of staff instructional practices with young people ages 5 and up, but it was designed to be most applicable to older children and adolescents (ages 10 and older) who are in the process of developing their full range of SEL skills. The PQA is best used within the context of group-based provision (where a single rater can observe staff interacting with several young people for at least 30 minutes of continuous time). The PQA self-assessment scoring process for any given staff person should take about 90 minutes to complete.

## Scoring

1. There are no PQA items for any scale or domain that require being reverse scored prior to calculating the scale and domain scores.
2. The mean of the response values for items 1-6 (in this case) should be calculated to yield a single Creating Safe Spaces scale score for each young person. If some item responses are missing, scale scores can still be calculated. (We recommend requiring two thirds of the items for each scale to create a scale score.) The resulting scale scores should range from 1 to 5.
3. Domain scores for the other three PQA domains should be calculated by taking the mean of the respective scale scores. The resulting domain scores should range from 1 to 5.

## Protocol

Please contact the Centre for Youth Impact for the full protocol for administering the PQA, as either a self-assessment or for an external assessor. In addition, the complete procedure for using the PQA as a self-assessment tool is described in the Program Quality Assessment Handbook: Social Emotional Learning Version, available upon request from the Weikart Center ([cypq.org](http://cypq.org)).

## FAQ

Would you observe 1-2-1's through the PQA? *Yes, if the "1-2-1" sessions can be observed virtually (e.g., via Zoom) so that the observation process does not interfere with the interaction between the adult and young person. Otherwise, not typically.*

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