

# Youth Reporting of SEL Skills

Manual and Guide  
Updated March 2022



## Introduction

The **Youth Report of SEL Skills (YRSS)** asks young people about **mental and behavioural aspects of their socio-emotional skills** in general (i.e. beyond the youth provision setting and into environments such as home and school). The YRSS can be used as a pre-test for provision planning purposes and, also, as a post-test for assessing socio-emotional skill growth. This manual includes the following section to support successful implementation and understanding of the YRSS:

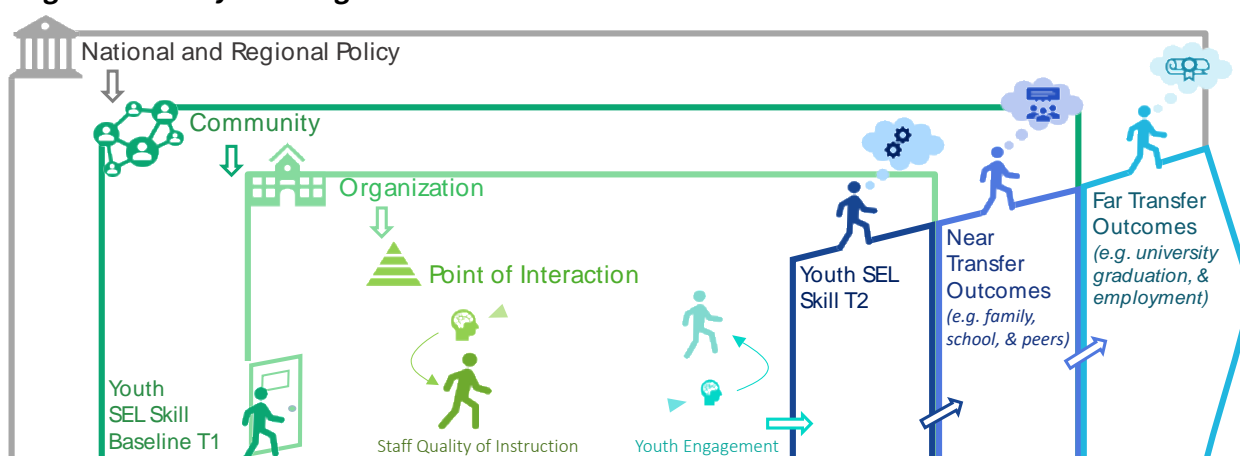
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## Theory of Change

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 YRSS

The Youth Report of Socio-emotional Skills (YRSS) is a self-report survey used to assess young people's *functional* mental and behavioural skills in six domains of socio-emotional skill functioning (i.e., Emotion Management, Empathy, Problem Solving, Initiative, Teamwork, & Responsibility). Functional skills are the best an individual can do with no additional supports from the setting, so they are good indicators of how young people are likely to perform in most life settings. Functional skills are relatively-enduring socio-emotional skill *traits* that are transferred into and out of provision; they are not static, but changes generally require effort, practice, and patience. As a self-report measure, the YRSS was designed to assess young people's functional socio-emotional skills, defined specifically in terms of attachment *schemas* (e.g., secure vs. anxious), *beliefs* about the self and world (including beliefs about their behaviour), and their control over the focus of *awareness* (Smith & Peck, 2020). In short, as described in the introduction to this technical guide, each of the six YRSS domain scores for each young person reflects their particular configuration of schemas, beliefs, and awareness in each of the six socio-emotional skill domains.

The YRSS was developed from wide range of similar measurement instruments that were designed to assess young people's beliefs about their own socio-emotional skills (e.g., Child Trends, 2014; Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016; Jones et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2018). In the YRSS case, we selected or created items that are specific to each of the six domains of socio-emotional skill functioning described in the SEL Challenge study (Smith et al., 2016).

### Validity

Although detailed psychometric information about the construct validity (e.g., the ability to distinguish between the scales and domains), criterion validity (e.g., the ability to predict young people's school performance), and reliability of the current version of the YRSS is pending, given the close alignment between the SEL domain definitions and the YRSS item content, the YRSS can be viewed as highly face valid measure of young people's functional socio-emotional skills. In addition, given our experience with this and similar measures, the YRSS domain scores can also be described as sufficiently reliable; that is, alpha coefficients of reliability for these kinds of measures generally exceed 0.70.

### Analysis

Data collected with the YRSS measurement tool can be entered into the Centre for Youth Impact's Data Portal. This will enable you to view change for individuals, cohorts and the results for your whole organisation. After calculating the domain scores, this information can be used to inform decisions about future training decisions or provision planning (e.g., organisations serving high percentages of young people who score very low in a given domain may decide to focus training and provision more closely on that domain content). If the YRSS is also used as a follow-up measure, then the YRSS domain scores can be used to assess SEL skill change (e.g., by comparing the domain score means from the baseline assessment to the domain score means from the follow-up assessment).

## YRSS Items

The YRSS includes 24 core items and two additional questions about the young people and their attendance. The response scale for items 3-26 is:

1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always

The additional questions, items 1 and 2, are useful for understanding important factors that may help you to interpret your findings. However, if you are already collecting this information about young people as part of your monitoring data and are able to link it to the questionnaire responses, you do not need to include these two questions.

1. How old are you? [1 = 9 or less, 2 = 10-12, 3 = 13-15, 4 = 16 or more]
2. How many hours do you attend provision in a typical week? [1 = 1 or less, 2 = 2-3, 3 = 4-5, 4 = 6 or more]

### Emotion Management

3. I tend to react to things before thinking much about them. (R)
4. I can usually calm myself down when feeling upset about something.
5. I am good at resisting temptation.
6. I bounce back quickly from bad experiences.

### Empathy

7. I feel bad when someone gets their feelings hurt.
8. I understand how people close to me feel.
9. It is easy for me to feel what other people are feeling.
10. I feel bad for those who are worse off than me.

### Teamwork

11. I seek help from others when I need it.
12. I respect other points of view, even if I disagree.
13. I go out of my way to help others.
14. I remind people to do their part.

### Responsibility

15. People can count on me to get my part done.
16. I do the things that I say I am going to do.
17. I take responsibility for my actions, even if I make a mistake.
18. I do my best when an adult asks me to do something.

### Initiative

19. I am good at finding things to do.
20. I give up when things get difficult. (R)
21. I work as long and hard as necessary to get a job done.
22. I am willing to risk some failures to reach my goals.

### Problem Solving

23. I start a new task by brainstorming lots of ideas about how to do it.
24. I make step-by-step plans to reach my goals.
25. I make alternative plans for reaching my goals when things don't work out.
26. I am good at managing time when I have to meet a deadline.

## How and When to Use

The YRSS can be used in different ways to suit different purposes. For example, the YRSS can be completed by young people shortly after they first enter provision in order to assess their *baseline* SEL skills. To get the most accurate responses, it is best to wait until staff and young people spend about four hours of provision time together before having them complete the YRSS so that young people feel completely comfortable asking questions about any of the words or phrases used in the YRSS items. Baseline SEL skill information can be used for provision planning purposes (e.g., to tailor provision to the needs of the young people who are attending).

The YRSS can also be used at both baseline and follow-up, shortly after or near the end of provision, in order to assess young people's SEL skill growth. For the purpose of detecting changes in SEL skills, we generally recommend annual assessments of young people's functional SEL skills because (a) functional skills should theoretically take longer to change than optimal SEL skills and (b) self-report measures tend to be less valid than observational measures due to *response bias* (e.g., demand characteristics, social desirability, acquiescence). Response bias usually shows up as scale scores that are higher than what we would normally expect (i.e., ceiling effects). In other words, people tend to self-report higher scores than may accurately represent their true standing, and such inflated baseline scores make it more difficult to detect actual changes.

In any case, response bias does not necessarily affect every young person's survey responses in the same way, and waiting until staff and young people become comfortable with one another before administering the baseline YRSS is designed to minimize response bias. If this protocol is well implemented, then using the YRSS as a follow-up measure after only a relatively short amount of provision time (e.g., 3 months) can be an effective way to assess SEL skill growth, as long as we do not have unrealistic expectations about the amount of change we are likely to find. For example, the average amount of change across all young people may not appear to be very large, even though we may be able to identify a smaller subset of young people who evidence substantial SEL skill growth.

SEL skill growth information can be used to understand young people's development and the relation of this development to other aspects of provision (e.g., the impact of quality on SEL skill growth).

We recommend using the YRSS with young people ages 10 and older. We also recommend encouraging young people to ask questions about any words or concepts about which they are uncertain. The YRSS should take about five minutes to complete, and can be used with young people in any kind of provision.

## Scoring

1. Young people's responses to all items marked by "(R)" should be reverse scored, such that:  
 $1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, \text{ and } 5 = 1.$
2. The mean of the response values across all items within a domain should be calculated to yield a single domain-specific scale score for each young person. For example, to produce a score for the domain of Emotion Management, you should calculate the mean score of items 3-6. If some item responses are missing, scale scores can be calculated as long as there are responses to at least 3 of the 4 items in each domain (but remember to calculate the mean score based only on the number of questions for which young people have actually provided a response). Each of the six domain-specific scale scores should range from 1 to 5.

## **Prompt**

Your responses to this survey will help us create the best possible program experiences for young people. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. We will keep your responses completely confidential, which means no one will ever know how you individually answered the questions.

## **Instructions**

Please read each statement, and then think about yourself in terms of the statement. If you are not sure about the meaning of any of the words, please ask for more information. Mark the box that best describes how you see yourself in general.

You are not required to answer any of the questions, and you can stop at any time. If you want to change any of your answers, please mark an “X” through the old response and fill in the new one.

Please note that higher scores are not better or worse – all people will have a mix of high and low scores, and we want to know your unique mix!

Please try to be as “true to you” as possible. When you are not sure, just pick the response option that is closest to how you think about yourself and keep moving. Thank you!

## **Protocol**

Place each young person’s unique identification number on each survey. Distribute the surveys to the corresponding young people, and ask them to return it to you (or put it in a designated location) after they complete it. Ask young people to read the instructions and ask any questions they may have. While they complete the survey, encourage them to ask for clarification about the meaning of any words about which they are uncertain. Give them no more than 10 minutes to complete the survey.

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