

# Research Guide

## College and Career Competency: *Social Awareness*

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### Definition:

Social awareness is an interpersonal competency that is characterized by accurately reading and responding to social situations and interactions (Larson et al., 2007; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). This includes the ability to make and maintain peer relationships (Holopainen et al., 2012) and interpret nonverbal communication (Larson et al., 2007). Social awareness is related to other competencies like **communication** (Botvin & Griffin, 2014; Larson et al., 2007), **empathy**, and **self-regulation** (Rosen et al., 2010).

### Essential Components for Students:

1. Try to understand social rules for the context/environment.
2. Apply your knowledge of social rules specific to the context/environment.

### Research:

- Students who are socially aware and competent will perform better academically (Wentzel, 1991a; Zorza et al., 2013); however, the relationship is complex because social awareness depends on underlying skills and competencies that on their own can positively impact outcomes. For example, social awareness encompasses prosocial behaviors like sharing and cooperating (Holopainen et al., 2012; Wentzel, 1991b) that can lead to greater acceptance by teachers and peers and a strong support network. This in turn facilitates learning and performance outcomes (Wentzel, 1991b).
- Effectiveness in social interactions is important for success in the workplace (Semadar et al., 2006). “Research has now acknowledged that such abilities as sensitivity and responsiveness to social and interpersonal cues, **networking** skills, **empathy** and impulse control, ability to put people at ease, and consideration are all vital ingredients for the performance of managers” (p. 443).
- Social awareness is transactional, involving interactions between individuals. It also is dependent on the context as different circumstances will require different behaviors (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).
- Rosen et al. (2010) examined 41 studies on antisocial and/or prosocial behaviors to determine how they impacted academic outcomes. The authors observed that “in 33 of the 38 studies involving antisocial measures, antisocial behavior had negative associations with academic achievement, social behaviors, or family, school, or classroom/teacher experiences” (p. 158). Relatedly, the authors discovered that “all studies involving prosocial behaviors...showed positive associations with desired academic and social outcomes such as literacy comprehension, school completion, friendships, peer acceptance, and occupational status. No studies reported negative or nonexistent relationships for prosocial behaviors” (p. 161).

- Social behavioral patterns established in childhood shape an individual’s success as an adult. A nearly 30-year-long longitudinal study found that the antisocial and prosocial behaviors participants acquired in their early years directly affected their educational attainment and career status by the time they approached middle age (Dubow et al., 2006). On the whole, the study found that participants with high levels of aggression ended up in lower status positions than participants who displayed prosocial competence.
- Youth who are not socially aware are at higher risk of developing problems like depression and antisocial behavior (Wang, 2009).
- Providing students with social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions at a young age contributes to their social skills and educational success. Among the intervention programs of note, Carter and Pool (2012) have asserted that the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program yields desirable results for students in early childhood settings. Relatedly, a longitudinal study of 2,937 students in grades 1–3 led by the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group showed that the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) program decreased aggression and increased prosocial behavior and academic engagement among students (Bierman et al., 2010). Males, as the study noted, benefitted the most from the PATHS program.
- Social awareness can be taught in the classroom (Beelmann et al., 1994; Botvin & Griffin, 2014; Durlak et al., 2010, 2011; Wentzel, 1991b) but requires teachers who are themselves socially and emotionally competent and can establish a supportive and cooperative classroom environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

## Assessments:

Please note that the assessments listed here reflect what is currently being used in multiple disciplines to measure social awareness. Not all of these measures will be easily used in classroom settings or by classroom teachers. However, the general knowledge that these measurements exist and the ability to review particular items from these assessments is valuable.

- The Interpersonal Competence Scale—Teacher (ICS-T; Cairns et al., 1995) measures the social and behavioral characteristics of elementary and middle school students. The ICS-T contains 18 items and uses a 7-point Likert scale with statements that anchor the rating at each extreme and in the middle. Sample items for the teacher survey are rating how often a student argues (*never, sometimes, always*), popularity (*not popular, so-so, very popular*), and how many friends the student has (*lots, some, no friends*). For more information about this measure, contact Dr. Thomas Farmer, Department of Health and Human Development, University of Pittsburgh, 5125 Wesley W. Posvar Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, [tfarmer@pitt.edu](mailto:tfarmer@pitt.edu) (Nangle et al., 2010).
- The Social Skills Improvement System (Baroody, 2016; Gresham, 2010; StriveTogether Task Force, 2013) survey has three subscales that use a 4-point scale of *never, seldom, often, and almost always* for teachers and parents to measure social skills, competing problem behaviors, and academic competence. The student version uses a 4-point scale of *not true, a little true, a lot true, and very true*. Examples of items from the social skills subscale:
  - Follows directions.
  - Participates appropriately in class.
  - Is well-behaved when unsupervised.
  - Takes care when using other people’s things.
  - Interacts well with other children.
  - Invites others to join in activities.

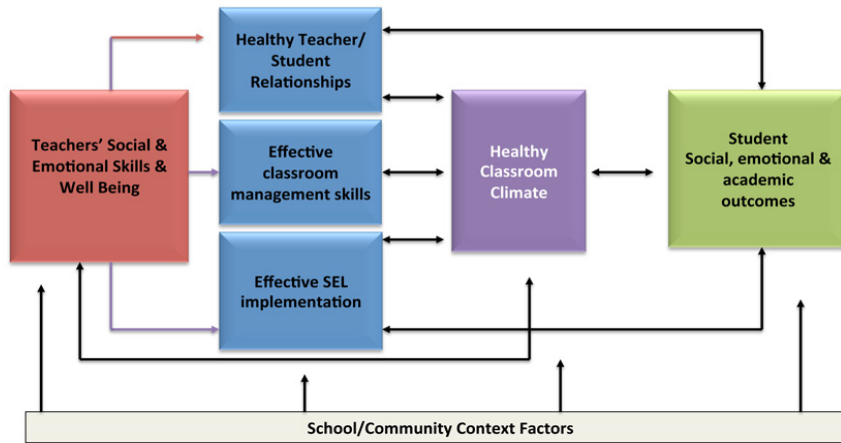
The survey was developed by Drs. Frank Gresham and Stephen N. Elliott and [can be purchased](#). Cost ranges from \$43 for test forms and reports to \$150 for support materials.

- The School Social Behaviors Scale, Second Edition (SSBS-2) is a two-page rating scale completed by teachers or other school personnel that looks at social competence as well as antisocial behavior (Haggerty et al., 2011). The social competence scale consists of 32 items that are rated using a 5-point scale, where 1 is *never* and 5 is *frequently*. Some items include “Cooperates with other students” and “Participates effectively in group discussions and activities.” The user guide and rating form can be purchased from [Brookes Publishing](#).
- The Child Trends organization, with support from the Tauck Family Foundation, developed surveys that can be administered to teachers and students to measure a variety of social and emotional skills, including social skills (Child Trends, 2014). The teacher survey uses a 4-point scale (*none of the time, a little of the time, most of the time, and all of the time*). Sample items from the teacher survey are “Cooperated with peers without prompting,” “Waited in line patiently,” and “Worked well with peers.” Sample items from the student survey are “I can wait in line patiently,” “I sit still when I’m supposed to,” and “I can wait for my turn to talk in class.”

### Instructional Practices:

- Teachers can help students understand and apply social rules like cooperating with others and maintaining self-control in different contexts by promoting discussion so students can interact regularly, being supportive and responsive (Wang, 2009), and modeling and practicing the underlying social awareness skills, like perspective-taking (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).
- Seemingly simple acts, such as teachers acknowledging their students’ help, can make a significant difference in the social-emotional development of students and their attainment of learning outcomes. Indeed, as Grant and Gino (2010) demonstrate, expressions of gratitude bolster students’ desire to initiate and sustain prosocial behaviors. Students who feel appreciated tend to show increased levels of **self-efficacy**, self-esteem, **motivation**, and persistence (Grant & Gino, 2010).
- Teachers who display strong social and emotional competence instill their students with prosocial behaviors, create enjoyable and productive social and emotional learning (SEL) environments, and typically feel more satisfied with their work than teachers with weaker social and emotional competence (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). A model of a prosocial classroom follows (p. 494):

**The Prosocial Classroom:  
A Model of Teacher Social and Emotional Competence and Classroom and Child Outcomes**



Jennings & Greenberg, 2009

- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) prepared a guide to evidence-based programs that have positively promoted SEL in middle and high school students (Axelrod, 2010). Examples of successful interventions includes the Student Success Skills program (Webb & Brigman, 2006), which consists of classroom lessons for students in grades 4–12. One lesson involves students brainstorming what a caring, supportive, and encouraging classroom looks, feels, and sounds like. The result is that students create high standards for social rules. See [Student Success Skills](#) for information on lessons and related costs.
- Parental involvement can greatly enhance students’ application of social rules in the long term. Elksnin and Elksnin (2000) provide [a research foundation and a series of practical models](#) for including parents as teaching partners.
- Other specific resources and programs are listed below.
  - Bullying. No Way! is a program developed by Australian Education Authorities & the State of Queensland to end bullying and promote prosocial behavior across the K–12 spectrum. The program website provides [a well-developed array of grade-level lesson plans and materials](#).
  - The Colorado Professional Learning Network offers lessons over prosocial behavior through the Read4Health project. See “[Blubber](#)” and “[White Socks Only](#).”
  - Explore (n.d.) has created [a series of videos and accompanying lessons](#) related to prosocial behavior for K–12 students. Content includes topics on the environment, human rights, and disabilities, among other areas.

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