Leveraging Interactive Media to Foster Social-Emotional Learning for Youth

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Executive Summary
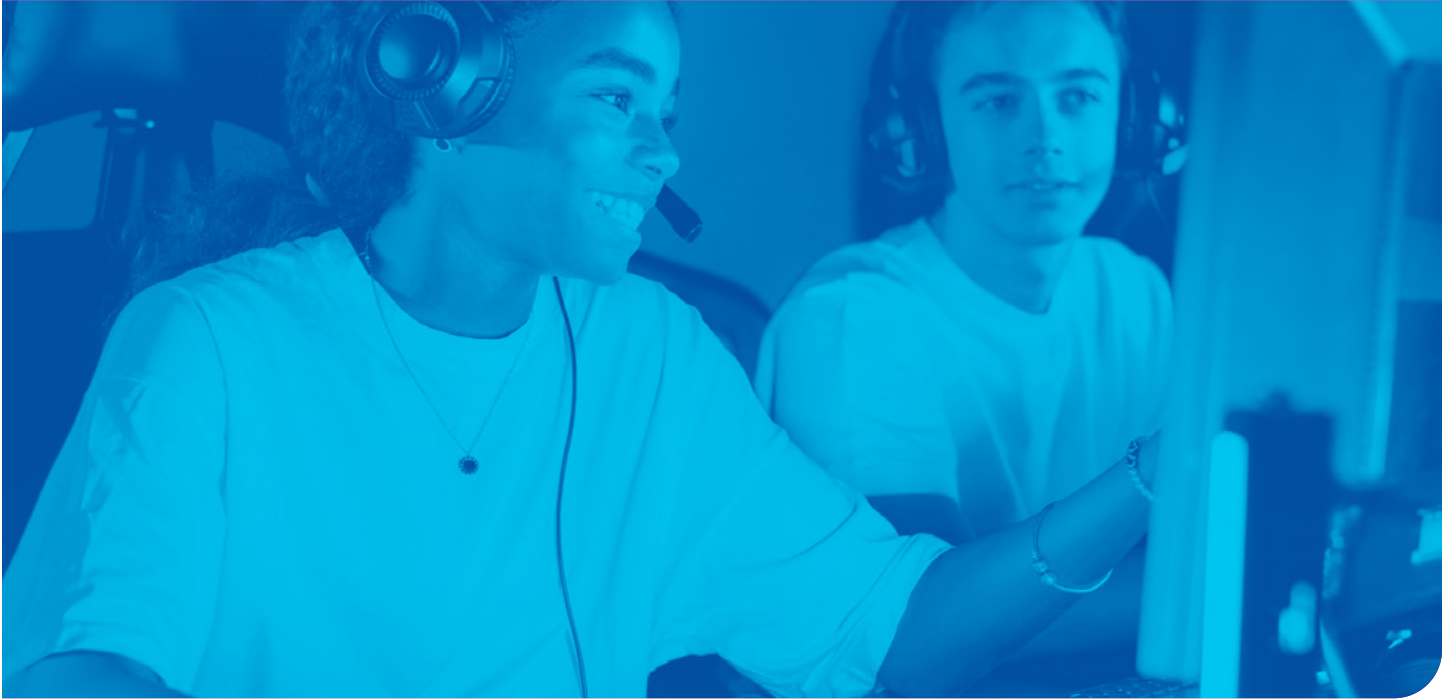
Young people's social-emotional learning (SEL) is critical to their success in school-based settings and to their overall mental health and thriving[1]. Considering that the current state of youth wellbeing has been labeled a crisis characterized by loneliness and self-harm, there is an urgent need to address and improve children's, teens', and young adults' mental health[2]. SEL stands as an evidence-based strategy that provides youth with the competencies and skills needed to flourish in school[3], career[4], and life[5].

However, constraints in schools make it difficult to scale SEL programming in meaningful and impactful ways. Limited time, scarce resources, curricular demands, and necessary teacher training have all been obstacle to implementing SEL at scale in school-based settings. Considering these limitations, opportunities outside of school need to be considered. Given that young people spend an average of eight hours daily[6] using screens for communication and entertainment, and that over two-thirds of teens report using social media[7], these media may provide a ready and available avenue to further support their mental, social, and emotional wellbeing.

To identify promising practices for embedding SEL into the technology and media that teens are already actively using outside of the classroom, we spoke with subject matter experts in SEL, educators, technology leaders, and young people ages 18-22. Discussions focused on both positive and challenging media experiences and explored opportunities to support SEL through existing or new media.

After speaking with professionals from some of the most popular entertainment applications and social media platforms, we conclude the following:

> **Technology leaders understand the value of social-emotional learning and see the potential for digital media to enhance and scale young people's access to it, but currently there is very little intentionally integrated SEL-focused design in non-educational media.**

> **Media and technology professionals understand that, by meeting youth where they are and providing them with embedded tools and systems, they can facilitate connection, inspire collaboration, develop empathy, and encourage self-awareness, with long-term impacts on youth wellbeing.**

> **AI and other modern technologies hold the promise to push these efforts forward by automating support, modeling SEL competencies, and encouraging real-time feedback and engaging storytelling.**

Overall, there is reason for optimism. Stakeholders across sectors recognize the tremendous potential to embed social-emotional learning into technology and media, and emerging tools are evolving rapidly to make this vision possible. With advanced platforms testing new ways to engage youth in personalized and meaningful experiences, the moment is ripe for innovation. However, to fully realize this potential and make the case for sustained investment, technology companies need robust, compelling research that clearly demonstrates the impact of embedded SEL across social media, gaming, and streaming environments both on young people's wellbeing and on their own bottom line.

8

hours each day young people spend on screens outside of schoolwork[6]

2/3

of teens use social media[7]

Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is "the process through which people acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions[8]". This process serves as **a critical foundation for empathy, a strong sense of identity, and healthy emotional management—all important ingredients to establishing and maintaining supportive relationships[9]**. One participant stated that SEL focuses on "what...young people need to own their development in a way that is really strengths-and asset-based," giving them meaningful ways to build and apply social capital in areas they care about, and supporting both interpersonal and intrapersonal growth.

> *"[SEL is] teaching about the aspect that you, as a whole person, come into settings and the way that you metabolize what it is you're experiencing, but...your whole person can be changed by these things. So being mindful, being aware, being complicit in the conversation of, 'Where are we going? How does this affect us?'"* **K-12 EDUCATOR**

A comprehensive body of research points to SEL's positive impact on multiple developmental outcomes, including children's and teens' learning and academic gains[10], long-term college and career success[11], mental and emotional wellbeing[12], and identity formation and social connectedness, greatly influencing whether they go on to thrive or struggle in adulthood[13]. SEL is emphasized in school and in out-of-school settings, where the implementation of SEL programs has been shown to enhance students' wellbeing both academically and socially[14]. Despite these promising indicators, SEL remains under-resourced in young people's lives. Classrooms are crowded with academic demands and SEL is often negatively scrutinized in the current socio-political environment[15].

Given its critical role in youth wellbeing and long-term thriving, we must act with urgency to discover and implement innovative ways to expand SEL experiences into the everyday environments where young people live, play, and connect.

To explore whether and how social-emotional learning (SEL) can be more deeply embedded into technology and digital media spaces, we conducted a series of semi-structured conversations informed by a review of existing literature in this area. Discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule[16] with 32 SEL and youth wellness experts, educators, technology leaders, and young people and centered on understanding the opportunities that exist for integrating SEL into technology and digital media to support positive youth development, and what challenges or limitations stakeholders anticipate in this integration.

Current Applications of SEL Within Technology and Digital Media

Educators, researchers, and tech designers have begun exploring ways to support SEL through media and technology, though the focus of research has centered primarily on formal educational settings[17]. When participants were asked to identify examples of SEL being meaningfully embedded in youth-facing technology and media outside of classroom contexts, they had few examples to offer.

> *"I think the challenge is that it's not front of mind for [product development] people. If you're designing a product just for teens [or] teen development, different developmental milestones would be more of a focus."* **TECH LEADER**

What we did hear from participants—and confirmed through a review of existing literature[18]—is that current applications of SEL within media and technology remain limited in scope and are primarily targeted at younger children through traditional educational media. Shows like *Sesame Street* and *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, often supported by companion apps like PBS Kids, focus on foundational skills like emotion identification, empathy, and relationship-building and rely heavily on story-telling for educational delivery, which may not be applicable to the learning goals of or appealing for older children.

> *"In the social emotional field you're seeing a lot of standard curriculum [and] professional development. Often assessments are tech based, but you're not seeing tons of tech innovation."* **SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT**

Social Platforms

Social platforms have the potential to support identity development and a sense of belonging and connectedness through positive peer interactions[19]. For youth in middle childhood, emerging technologies like conversational agents are beginning to model positive self-talk and encourage emotional resilience (e.g., *Superhero Zip*). Among adolescents, greater access to smartphones has enabled researchers and developers to explore mobile interventions that support individual wellness (e.g., gratitude intervention apps) or foster collaborative learning and conversation (e.g., *Lina is Not Alone* or *BAND* app).

Social Video Games

Social video games (e.g., *Fortnite, Roblox, Minecraft*) have emerged as environments in which there are existing organic opportunities for SEL engagement. While these games hold considerable promise for fostering collaborative problem-solving, conflict resolution, and prosocial relationship behaviors, they are not deliberately designed with these outcomes in mind. Without this intentionality, it is unlikely that these platforms will meet their full potential in this area.

> *"What's the actual planful way in which this particular game or website or social media platform will help them build which skills? Be very specific about the skills [and] how they are building it."* SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT

Though it holds much promise, research on how media and technology can effectively support SEL, particularly outside of formal classroom programming, is limited. Additionally, tech tools may work well in research studies but prove impractical in real-world settings. As our takeaways underscore, there is a notable absence of accessible, well-designed features that intentionally embed SEL in the media youth already use for entertainment, communication, and play[20].

This gap highlights both a challenge and a clear opportunity: to identify what effective, embedded SEL looks like in youth-facing technology and media, and to encourage innovation in how these environments can be used to support young people's social-emotional development. Meeting youth in the digital spaces they already inhabit is essential for ensuring that SEL efforts are far-reaching, relevant, engaging, accessible, and equitable.

Recommendations for Technology and Digital Media Companies

In our structured conversations, several key themes emerged around how SEL can be woven into digital environments. Participants agreed that **SEL can be powerfully integrated into the platforms youth already use**—streaming services, video games, and social media—to scale access and learning opportunities. These recommendations synthesize key themes raised, and while not prescriptive or exhaustive, they reflect the most commonly shared ideas across the stakeholder groups.

> *"It boils down to meeting young people where they are, but to be able to reach them with compelling content that isn't necessarily saying, 'Okay today we are going to learn about…' and instead integrating it into things they are already doing."* **TECH LEADER**

> *"I can't think of an app or tech where the average teen will say 'I'm going to play with this app so I can build my agency'."* **SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT**

Utilize intentional design to facilitate meaningful connections with others

Young people naturally seek connection and community—an instinct that new features or platforms should intentionally encourage. Technology designed with an SEL lens could help young people identify and share their passions and form relationships across boundaries such as culture, language, race, and geography. This might look like **peer mentorship systems** in gaming platforms, where experienced players have opportunities to guide newcomers, or **guided relationship building** in text-based platforms, where users are provided suggestions for engaging with others within a community. Platforms can provide **just-in-time guidance** about appropriate behavior for different digital contexts and **pause-and-reflect prompts** that ask users to consider the impact of their post or response before submitting. Communities with robust relationship-building opportunities can design **relationship health dashboards** that provide youth with ongoing insights into their interaction patterns and offer suggestions for increasing their positive behaviors.

> *"It's not a curriculum, it's about creating authentic ways for young people to engage."*
> **SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT**

Create real-time feedback systems

When young people have space to recognize and process their emotions, they're better able to act with empathy and compassion, which is key to building and maintaining healthy relationships. This might look like using AI integration to build in **timing-based feedback** that provides immediate responses to social interactions (e.g., visual indicators when messages are supportive vs. potentially hurtful), or **consequence visualization,** which would allow users to preview potential or likely reactions to their content before posting. Native platform AI features can also be designed to support young people in rehearsing difficult conversations, identifying their emotions, or practicing their own reactions to challenging situations. Providing **low-risk, virtual opportunities** for youth to explore how different decisions may lead to different outcomes can help them practice and prepare for making responsible decisions or seek additional support.

> *"As the technology becomes more and more intimate and personal, I think the responsibility increases to have equally empathetic responses and helpful guidance."*
> **TECH LEADER**

Offer opportunities for practicing teamwork and collaborative problem solving

Social gaming platforms offer a unique opportunity to enhance SEL through community engagement and gamification, including real-time development of conflict management skills. Gaming platforms can highlight the value of supportive teamwork over individual performance by designing **team collaboration metrics** and can design in-game rewards for **community service challenges** that focus on supporting other players. In multi-player interactions, gaming communities can **offer feedback on communication** and provide structured prompts and suggested processes in **guided conflict resolution.**

> *"People seem to have a lot more audacity online than they do in person."* YOUTH

Encourage self-awareness and self-management practice

Many digital platforms attempt to support self-regulation through **nudges,** like suggesting breaks after extended use. More engaging features can be designed to explicitly encourage young people to check in with themselves and how they are feeling and to build their self-management and regulation skills. These might include **gamifying time limits,** creating healthy challenges, using vivid imagery to **remind younger users to assess their wellbeing,** or regularly **encouraging algorithm resets.** Platforms can provide recommendations to connect these online behaviors with physical-world self-management strategies that help youth identify and respond to their emotions and needs.

> *"Sometimes when you're scrolling too long, TikTok is like, 'oh, it's time for you to take a break...'. When I see those [prompts] I just go, 'okay' and skip it. So maybe if they make it somehow more persuasive, like, 'oh, hey, maybe you could do this instead, maybe you can go for a walk, then come back,' or something to really convince people to actually take a break off of social media."* YOUTH

Model social-emotional competencies in digital content

Many people, including youth, form parasocial relationships with characters, influencers, and AI-enabled agents. When youth see trusted creators and characters applying healthy intrapersonal and interpersonal skills such as self-awareness, social awareness, empathy, and self-management, they can more readily learn to apply them in the physical world. This can be particularly powerful in video-based platforms, which can provide **perspective-shifting content,** highlighting how the same situation affects different people, **post-viewing reflection opportunities,** which prompt users to consider how the content they view relates to their own experiences, and **explicit norm comparisons,** which can show differences in expectations for certain types of relationships and social interactions. Platforms can also design methods to reward creators for content that authentically models healthy social-emotional skills.

> *"Having experiences with and without media helps to know both sides of things and become more efficient users."* YOUTH

Use engaging and interactive stories to teach SEL

Storytelling is a powerful method that could be integrated into all types of platforms to provide opportunities for modeling and instructing about social-emotional competencies. Generative AI tools, like chatbots and voice agents, could help youth **construct stories that build on their real-world experiences,** providing opportunities for reflection, self-awareness, social awareness, emotion naming, and mindfulness.

> *"How can you use this platform to learn or experience different things? Could you use chatbots to tell the story or create chatbots that can then tell the story of how to move through the platform? And maybe there's different levels [to] practice [skills] like difficult conversations with the chatbot...sort of like creative storytelling."* TECH LEADER

Prioritize media literacy and online safety practices

Digital spaces should help youth learn how to apply **critical thinking skills** to evaluate, engage with, and create online media. Platforms should **deploy adaptive content moderation systems** that adjust protection levels based on demonstrated user maturity and ability to maintain healthy, prosocial engagement with others. As young people are encouraged to engage more deeply with social-emotional skills, it will be even more important for platforms to implement **automatic support detection,** using AI-enabled systems that identify potential user distress and follow clear escalation paths with appropriate professional resources to provide support when needed without requiring youth to request help proactively.

> *"We don't want technology to replace human relationships in high-risk or sensitive areas. There's something lost when we don't know who's on the other side of the screen."* TECH LEADER

Build bridges between online and offline experiences

Key to the impact of SEL on young people's outcomes is their ability to apply their learning in their daily lives and in-person interactions. Technology can embed these digital-to-physical transitions with gamification elements to encourage and celebrate the transfer of skills to offline settings. Particularly for younger users, platforms could create **family co-engagement features** that encourage parents and other caregivers to take part in the online content and to practice what they are learning together in their offline lives.

> *"While we do believe that it's extremely important to not ignore the reliance on technology, there still has to be some type of infusion of face-to-face situations."* EDUCATOR

Priorities for Empirical Research

Looking ahead, **there is strong potential to integrate SEL into technology and digital media, but research is needed to understand which interventions translate most effectively into existing entertainment and social media platforms.** While there are existing efforts focused on SEL development through school-based technology and educational-entertainment platforms, their effectiveness and impact remain underexplored. A deeper understanding of young people's needs and experiences can also inform regulation and policies in technology and in education, ensuring that youth have opportunities to strengthen their SEL skills across multiple touchpoints.

> *"What is it that kids need at different stages? What developmental stages are they going to go through and what things are most damaging and what are most helpful? [We need] the scientific information so the conversation can be centered around actual fact."* TECH LEADER

Research is also needed to explore how interactive digital media spaces can facilitate SEL practice and which platform features support or hinder that process. With AI rapidly developing and being used across platforms like social media, home-based robots, and voice assistants, further investigation is required to determine how AI can best support SEL development. As some participants noted and previous research has suggested, certain skills are more effectively developed in-person[21] or may be hindered by technology's features, especially for younger children. It is therefore important to identify how technology can best complement this process without impeding it[22].

As research progresses on questions of feasibility of integrating SEL into tech and media, it is essential to engage with and to share findings with a range of stakeholders. Tech and media companies should create opportunities and resources to fund research and generate ongoing dialogue about best practices for youth wellbeing within the digital ecosystem. Cross-sector collaboration—among educators, researchers, and technology and media designers—is essential to ensure that tools, programs, and features reflect prosocial design principles and that platforms, especially social media, are responsibly designed to best support the wellbeing of their young users.

Importantly, youth perspectives should be prioritized to ensure that new research and features are developmentally appropriate and truly beneficial. As one tech leader pointed out, *"right now, when we talk about lived experience, it's often parents' lived experiences, which don't always match [with those of youth]"*. Engaging youth from diverse backgrounds in designing, implementing, and interpreting research about how technology can be used to support them will ensure that innovations in technology for this purpose remain relevant and helpful for their SEL development.

Lastly, measuring effectiveness is critical for continuous improvement and for demonstrating to tech companies that SEL features benefit both young people and their bottom line. Longitudinal studies should track whether digital SEL skills persist over time and transfer to other settings, while combining behavioral measures with self-reports to improve accuracy.

Conclusion

SEL skills such as social awareness, empathy, and self-regulation are foundational to young people's long-term ability to thrive both academically and socially in an increasingly complex and digital world. Furthermore, as awareness and concern grow around youth mental health and wellbeing[23], emphasis has been placed on the importance of proactive support for young people[24]. This highlights the value of increasing accessibility to preventative approaches like social and emotional wellness programs that help nurture positive and protective relationships for youth[25].

Technology and digital media have significant potential to play a transformative role in addressing youth mental health. By embedding social-emotional learning into digital products and communities, we can help young people build essential developmental skills in ways that also support their mental wellbeing.

While there is immense potential, there is still much work to be done to fully understand which SEL skills are best suited for teaching in digital spaces and how effectively these skills can be retained and applied in real-world contexts. Understanding the nuances of how young people engage with digital platforms and what works for various developmental stages is crucial to ensuring that SEL interventions are not only impactful but enduring.

By working in collaboration with researchers, educators, tech developers, families, and most importantly, young people, we can create environments that support the growth of essential SEL skills while setting the stage for a generation that is socially and emotionally equipped to navigate the complexities of the future.

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Question Guides

All Participants

1. What is your role and what experience do you have with social emotional learning or some of its building blocks, if any?

2. Do you believe that SEL is important for young people's development and thriving? If so, why?

Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

1. In what ways do you believe tech and media could support children's and teens' SEL competency building? To what extent do tech and media complement or detract from more traditional in-school methods of this learning?

2. Have you seen any examples of existing tools, programs, or features that successfully integrate SEL (or seem promising for doing so) in digital spaces?

3. In your experience, what core SEL competencies are most promising for being able to be supported through online engagement? Which do you think are the most difficult? Why?

4. What do you see as the most significant challenges in supporting young people's SEL within digital spaces? Are there particular developmental stages or ages where SEL integration may be more or less possible or successful? Are there particular online experiences or features where SEL integration may be more or less possible or successful?

5. If you had a magic wand, how would you build SEL into digital spaces? What further information or research would you need to be confident in building out SEL interventions within online spaces?

Educators

1. Have you used online tools or platforms to teach or promote SEL in students? If so, what was the experience like?

2. Do your students have SEL gaps? If so, what are the most common SEL gaps you observe in your students? What challenges do you face in integrating SEL into your students' educational experiences? What successes have you experienced?

3. In what ways do you think tech and media could help to close those gaps (or, otherwise, could be contributing to them)? - OR - To what extent do tech and media complement or detract from more traditional in-school methods of this learning?

4. If you had a magic wand, how would you change the digital ecosystem to be more supportive of kids' and teens' social-emotional learning and prosocial development? What kinds of tools or resources would you find most helpful to support SEL in both classroom and digital settings?

5. What further information or research would you need to be confident in building out SEL interventions within online spaces? How would you want to use this within your teaching practice?

6. Are you aware of any features or initiatives within online platforms, tools, or apps that are designed to or otherwise have the effect of supporting kids' SEL competency building? If so, what do you believe is their impact?

Tech Leaders

1. From your perspective, in what ways do you believe tech and media could support children's and teens' SEL competency building?

2. Are you aware of any features or initiatives within your own or others' platforms that are designed to support SEL competency building? If so, what do you believe (or what does research show) is their impact? Have you seen any features or initiatives that perhaps weren't designed to do so but had the unintended positive consequence of supporting the development of social emotional competencies?

3. What role do you think your platform/tool/app has in fostering prosocial behavior, particularly among young people?

4. If resource and financial constraints were non-existent, how might your platform use design elements (e.g., gamification, AI algorithms) to teach or reinforce SEL skills? [As a reminder - key social emotional competencies include: self awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

5. What are the biggest challenges in embedding SEL features into interactive media platforms?

6. What further information or research would you need to be confident in building out SEL interventions within online spaces?

7. How could platforms be incentivized to prioritize the social-emotional learning, prosocial development, and wellbeing of their users?

Youth

Social skills like understanding yourself, managing your emotions, and showing empathy are super important for building strong relationships, doing well in school and work, and being a positive part of your community.

1. Have you ever learned something meaningful about yourself or someone else from an online interaction? Not just small facts like their favorite color, but something that helped you grow as a person? (e.g., finding people with similar interests, exploring your identity). What about that experience made it meaningful? Did it change how you interact with people, either online or in real life? If so, how?

2. Have you ever been in an online space where the way it worked either helped or made it harder for you to manage your feelings, show empathy, or connect with others? (e.g., react to others' comments negatively, feel isolated) What about that experience stood out to you? Was it a specific feature or something about how the platform worked?

3. What kinds of online experiences make you feel MORE connected, supported, or understood by others? What kinds of online experiences make you feel LESS connected, supported, or understood by others?

4. Have you used any online platforms or resources to learn or practice social-emotional skills (e.g., TV shows, videos)? How was that experience for you? What did you like or not like about learning these skills online?

5. How do you think social media, games, or other interactive platforms could help people your age build skills like empathy, self-awareness, or making good decisions in ways that are different than offline? In other words, what are the unique opportunities for online platforms to help build these skills? (e.g., any features to be added, kept, or removed, anything you'd like to be able to do on these platforms)

6. If you had a magic wand, what would you change about the online world to make it a better, more supportive place for teens to grow socially and emotionally?

7. Thinking about yourself when you were younger—or about younger siblings or cousins—what do you wish was different about their early online experiences to help them build stronger social and emotional skills?

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