



Fostering Belonging And Peer Connections: Evaluating the Impact Of the Mental Health Promotion Pilot

Fall 2024 Report



Prepared by

Jovani Azpeitia, Rachael Hocevar, Helen Lee, and Janelle Salcedo,
Youth and Educator SEL Lab, foundry10

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Boys & Girls Clubs of Washington State Association
for their partnership on this study.

Questions or Comments?

Contact Helen Lee, Research Lead, at helen@foundry10.org.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
About the Mental Health Promotion Pilot	4
About the Study	5
Preliminary Findings	7
Impact of the Behavioral Support Specialist	7
Impact of PAX Tools	8
Impact of SEL Programming	10
Challenges to the Effectiveness of Strategies	11
Suggested Changes from Staff and Members	12
Suggestions and Questions	13
References	14



Introduction

Afterschool programs play a critical role in creating environments where youth can grow their social and emotional skills, form positive relationships, and develop a strong sense of belonging. These elements contribute to positive youth development and can protect against negative mental health outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression, emotional distress). Social and emotional learning (SEL) and a supportive community are important for all young people, especially as they continue to recover from the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, organizations are not always equipped with the tools, training, and resources needed to facilitate high-quality programs where young people learn the social and emotional skills they need to succeed in life.

About the Mental Health Promotion Pilot

The **Mental Health Promotion Pilot (MHPP)**, a unique three-year pilot program developed by the [Boys & Girls Clubs of Washington State](#) (BGCWA), aims to positively impact the behavioral health of its members through three main strategies:

- **Behavioral support specialists (BSS):** Each BGCWA organization received funding to hire a full-time BSS to directly support students, families, and staff. The responsibilities of the BSS may include, but are not limited to: leading SEL programming for members, training and supporting staff to implement best practices, providing individualized and group support to members and their families, and facilitating community engagement events.
- **Trauma-informed training:** Each BGCWA organization received access to “[PAX Tools](#),” a trauma-informed professional development program that introduces staff to 11 evidence-based strategies for working with members and families. The PAX Tools program includes access to tools and a continuing education course to reinforce use of these strategies.
- **SEL programming:** Each BGCWA organization received support to implement evidence-based SEL curriculum and activities at each Club. Such programming aims to build on the work of school partners by developing members’ emotional awareness and management, fostering empathy, encouraging prosocial behaviors, and enhancing relationships within the Club community.

About the Study

In partnership with the BGCWA, [foundry10](#) is examining the impact of the Mental Health Promotion Pilot (MHPP) on the social and emotional development of youth and staff as well as on the climate of participating Clubs. This report presents **preliminary findings**¹ based on data collected from your Boys & Girls Club organization in the fall of 2024:

- One-time surveys and interviews conducted with 3 staff (1 organization leader, 1 BSS, and 1 Youth Development Practitioner).
- 1 hour of SEL program observation with ~40 youth in grades 3 to 5 at one of your Clubs.
- The [SEL PQA](#) guided all program observations and scores are available upon request.
- Responses from ~20 youth in grades 3 to 5 gathered during a listening session at one of your Clubs.

In analyzing the above data sources, foundry10 seeks to address the following key research questions:

1. How are the three main MHPP strategies contributing to the social-emotional skills development and sense of belonging of Club members in grades 3 to 6?
2. Are there instances in which these strategies are not leading to the intended outcomes for this group?
3. What changes to the MHPP may enhance the intended outcomes?

The data collected at your organization is part of a larger mixed-methods study taking place throughout the 2024-25 academic year and involving eight organizations across

¹ While we hope this report provides valuable insights to support your organization's work, we advise caution in interpreting the findings. The data were collected at a single point in time, limiting our ability to observe changes over time or establish causality. Two additional factors constrain our findings. Distinguishing the impact of the BSS role from the impact of her position as a director was challenging, as she occupies both roles. Additionally, our understanding of the SEL program's impact is limited because conclusions are based on secondhand accounts from staff who do not lead these programs, a single observation by the research team, and youth feedback during the listening session. A second round of data collection in winter 2025 will help to validate and expand these findings.

the state of Washington. Researchers selected a geographically representative group of Boys & Girls organizations who are participating in the MHPP, serve upper elementary youth, and indicated interest and capacity to partake in data collection activities.

Preliminary Findings

The BSS and PAX Tools appear to develop staff capacity to support positive youth development in a trauma-responsive and restorative manner, whereas SEL programs develop and strengthen positive peer relationships. Together, these three MHPP strategies contribute to a positive climate at the Clubs where members feel a strong sense of belonging.

Impact of the Behavioral Support Specialist

The Behavioral Support Specialist (BSS) primarily supports the professional development of Club staff. She works directly with Club staff to integrate trauma-informed and restorative practices and to implement behavioral support systems. This work aims to **develop staff capacity to foster and reinforce positive behaviors** among members. She also manages staff implementation of SEL programming and serves as a resource for staff in their work with youth. These efforts aim to **develop staff capacity around supporting the social-emotional skill development and overall well-being** of members.

- **Trauma-Informed and Restorative Practices:** “[The BSS trains] staff on...how to have those restorative conversations with youth that are open-ended and reflective. [W]e want to try and encourage [youth] to understand the impact of their actions and come up with their own solutions on how to repair harm that was caused... In addition to those trainings, [she] also [leads] trainings around suicide prevention and intervention with our staff.”
- **Behavioral Support Systems:** “[The BSS trains staff] on how to fill out incident reports, the importance of filling out incident reports to track behaviors [as well as] success plans, which are, in other words, a behavioral support plan. [These plans are] created in collaboration with the family and the Club director to figure out the best ways to support the youth...”

At the Club, we also train on ‘Think It Through’ sheets, ‘For Your Information’ sheets...for the smaller incidents where it [may be] positive or negative behaviors...like, ‘Hey, maybe your kiddo needed several reminders today’ or ‘Hey, your kid did a great job at listening and following directions.’ [This ensures]

that we're having positive communications with families outside of just the negative ones to build healthy relationships, that is something [the BSS is] responsible for teaching and connecting with staff on.”

- **SEL Programming:** “[The BSS oversees] that curriculum is being implemented within Clubs for the small groups. So once a week, each of our Clubs run what's called a ‘Mental Health Small Group.’ They have autonomy over what they want to call that group, whether it's ‘Kindness Club’ or...‘Mental Health Mondays,’ and they get to pick which day of the week it's on. But it's important that time is structured, that it follows the framework of BGC so that we have a beginning, middle, and end community builder, and that we are teaching those social-emotional skills within those groups.”
- **Resource for Staff:** “[The BSS receives] a lot of calls from staff just asking for mental health resources, providing referrals to services, whether it be food, housing, mental health, overall, just wellbeing.”

The research team did not have the opportunity to observe the BSS during the site visit. However, survey and interview data affirm the positive contributions of the BSS on member and staff development.

Impact of PAX Tools

The PAXIS Institute Training and PAX Tools support **staff implementation of trauma-informed practices**. These practices assist with behavioral management within programs by fostering and reinforcing positive behaviors among members. Commonly referenced PAX Tools at your organization include:

- **Group Agreements:** “The staff utilized [the PAX ‘Shared Vision’ worksheet] in week one of each quarter because each quarter we [re-establish] group agreements...with youth voice. [The] shared vision tool has been used by staff to establish, ‘Okay, what do you want the Club to feel like? What do you want it to look like?’ [T]hen staff fill that out and they have that posted.”
- **Attention Getters:** “We all got harmonicas...to get youths' attention. [It] was a pretty popular way to get their attention for a little while...because they were...a little bit unexpected.”
- **Timer:** “I see youth utilizing the tools that they're learning when they're feeling frustrated, asking for things that they need, [like] asking to set the timer for their

breaks: 'Hey staff, I need five minutes.' 'Okay, You can set the timer and when five minutes goes off, you can rejoin the activity.'

- **Random Sticks:** "PAX sticks [helps in] avoiding conflict because [youth are] chosen at random. I've watched staff utilize the PAX Tools sticks and found success with that."
- **Kudos:** "Having [the kudos] as well...not just having conversations with caregivers when things are not going so well, but also balancing it with much more of those positive comments going home, and the youth really appreciate that."
- **Calm Corners** "Calm spaces have been really handy to give those kiddos who maybe need to step outside of the classroom to self-regulate and give them a safe space to do that."

The PAXIS Institute training, coupled with other professional learning, **deepen staff's trauma awareness** and strengthen their ability to create a trauma-responsive environment for members.

"I remember learning about [adverse childhood experiences] a little bit more...and thinking, 'Yeah, you don't really know what a youth is going through.' I always try to take that into consideration when I see a Club member upset... I'm always like, 'Well, there's got to be something more than surface level.' [Another] one was not being too loud because I could trigger some negative responses, or finding better ways to get attention other than just shouting over everybody."

*"[The PAXIS Institute Training] really has helped in tying in all of the other training and support that we have on behavioral support and mental health promotion. [The trainings have collectively encouraged staff] to sit down with the youth and talk, [use] our **restorative questions, addressing harm, or talking to the youth that did the harm.** [For example] 'Let's walk through and actually draw out or write out what you were thinking before? How were you feeling?'"*

Survey results indicate that staff find PAX Tools useful and other professional learning and resources more useful (e.g., meetings with Club Directors, trainings on: zones of regulation, restorative practices, conflict resolution, suicide prevention and intervention, trauma-informed practices and ACEs, etc.), suggesting that additional, reinforcing professional supports **develop staff capacity to meet the social-emotional needs of members.**

Impact of SEL Programming

SEL programs, like *Second Step*, *SMART Moves: Emotional Wellness*, and *Harmony Academy*, can support the development of a range of valuable social-emotional skills, such as the ability to recognize and manage emotions, collaborate with peers, and productively resolve conflicts. Adapting lessons from these curricula to local contexts can ensure greater efficacy in meeting the needs of youth. Presently, program activities and practices seek to develop **listening skills**, **mindful awareness**, and **positive peer relationships**.

- **Community Building:** Activities like the telephone game observed during the site visit provide youth with opportunities to practice listening and speaking skills in a low-stakes setting.
- **Arts and Crafts:** Arts and crafts projects like the beading activity observed during the site visit offer youth engaging ways to practice being present in a moment and focusing on a task. Additionally, these types of projects culminate in a tangible product that youth are able to keep and share.
- **Peer Mentoring:** Consistently encouraging youth to seek help from peers, as mentioned by an interviewed staff member, fosters positive ways of interacting with others and develops leadership and responsibility: “[T]hey feel a little bit more connected and get to know each other a little bit more...[and it] makes them feel like they're helping out, which they totally are.”

Additionally, programs, like the one the research team observed, appear to **support youth interests** and **foster teamwork**.

Overall,

- the **BSS** supports staff in integrating trauma-informed and restorative practices, implementing behavioral support systems, and facilitating SEL programming;
- **PAX Tools**, alongside additional professional development and support, further support staff in creating trauma-responsive environments;
- and adapted **SEL programs** foster mindfulness, listening, and positive peer relationships.

Challenges to the Effectiveness of Strategies

While the MHPP provides promising support to staff in their work with youth, three conditions hinder the effectiveness of these strategies in fostering members' social-emotional skills and a sense of belonging at the Clubs.

- **Limited Direct Support for Youth from Trained Professional:** The dual role of the BSS as both a specialist and associate director limits their capacity for direct youth engagement: "It's been challenging to balance both roles. [T]his past year...my role has definitely shifted [to] focus on training and supporting staff versus direct service with the kids." While the BSS provides invaluable training to YDPs, and these staff members are developing their skills, youth with high needs may require more targeted and intensive support from a staff member with specialized training and experience, such as that of the BSS.
- **Inconsistent Implementation of PAX Tools:** Inconsistencies in staff use of PAX Tools may undermine the intended benefits of these trauma-informed, behavior support practices. Some staff embrace the tools, while others do not use them because they have not had enough practice or success. Sometimes the success of the tools requires adapting them to youth's social and emotional state or needs within the moment.
- **SEL Program Engagement Challenges:** Staff noted engagement challenges, particularly with older youth who find programming uninteresting or too similar to

school: “[Getting] kids to want to participate in the programming and...stay engaged [has] been the biggest [feedback] from all staff... Some youth [have shared], ‘We talk about mental health at school. It's boring’ [or that] they would rather go play dodgeball.” Although the BSS works with staff to “find creative ways” to engage youth in the SEL programming, some youth still express not wanting to participate.

The main MHPP strategies contribute to the social-emotional skill development and sense of belonging among members primarily through professional development and support of staff. However, the limited capacity of the BSS to directly support youth, inconsistent implementation of trauma-informed practices, and challenges with engaging youth in the SEL programs, limit the effectiveness of the MHPP in achieving these outcomes.

Suggested Changes from Staff and Members

To enhance intended outcomes, interviewed staff and members suggested three changes.

- **Hire An Additional BSS:** Adding another BSS or peer-level support for the current BSS may strengthen staff implementation of trauma-informed and restorative practices within SEL programs, and provide additional support for members with high-needs: “[Having] another person who could share in the work and...have the capacity to [directly support youth]. That's something that...youth would benefit from... It's [also] beneficial for staff because they have somebody that can model best practices and go to...and say, ‘Hey, this is what I'm really struggling with.’ Or, ‘Hey, can you observe me?’ [O]ne person can't support eight Clubs and over a thousand youth. [The additional BSS can continue] to empower our staff...and to make sure that they feel like they have the support and tools that they need to support the kids that they're serving.”
- **Provide Additional SEL Training and Resources:** Providing staff with additional support to facilitate SEL programs may make lessons more engaging and responsive to the interests and needs of members. This can include modeling best practices, co-facilitation, and observing and providing feedback around how to adapt activities and practices.

- **Share Best Practices with Families:** Sharing best practices used in the Clubs with families may produce more consistent behavioral expectations and increase support across members' primary settings. For example, one Club Director shared how to use the Zones of Regulations with families. Families were appreciative and reported feeling better equipped to support their children's emotional awareness and regulation.

These changes may strengthen the overall impact of the MHPP on the social-emotional development and sense of belonging among Club members.

Suggestions and Questions

The following suggestions and questions focus on potential ways to enhance the impact of the BSS, trauma-informed training, and SEL programming to improve the social-emotional skills and sense of belonging among Club members in grades 3 to 6. Suggestions and questions are drawn from analysis of data collected from your organization.

- **Model Best Practices for Staff:** The BSS provides staff with substantial guidance around implementing trauma-informed and restorative practices as well as positive behavioral supports for members. However, interviews and program observations suggest a need for and interest in additional instructional support for staff, such as observing an experienced facilitator set expectations, establish routines, and lead activities within a program or receiving coaching around specific practices. How might your organization structure more opportunities for staff to develop a better understanding of what best practices look like when effectively implemented?
- **Continue Program Quality Improvement Efforts:** At the time of interviews, organization leaders noted recently beginning program observations and providing feedback to staff that aligns with the evidence-based [Youth Program Quality Improvement \(YPQI\)](#) approach. This process may inform and aid in developing staff capacity to meet the social-emotional needs of members. How will your organization ensure teams receive adequate support and training to create and carry out their plans for program improvement based on data collected?

- **Provide Staff with Coaching:** Instructional coaching can support staff in learning how to adapt best practices for their contexts and typically builds on what staff learn when they see an experienced facilitator model best practices with youth. Instructional coaching should include cycles of collaborative planning and assessment/feedback, which aligns with your organization’s recent YPQI efforts. How might the YPQI process include instructional coaching for staff so they are better equipped to adapt best practices for their programs and the youth they serve?

These suggestions and questions aim to strengthen the work of the BSS, deepen trauma-informed practices, and enhance SEL programming, ultimately supporting the social-emotional skills of members and sense of community within each Club.

References

- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(3–4), 294–309. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9300-6>
- Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning as a Public Health Approach to Education. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), Article 1.
- Hurd, N., & Deutsch, N. (2017). SEL-Focused After-School Programs. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 95–111. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0000>
- Jones, S. M., Brush, K. E., Ramirez, T., Mao, Z. X., Marenus, M., Wettje, S., Finney, K., Raisch, N., Podoloff, N., Kahn, J., Barnes, S., Stickle, L., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Cuartas, J., & Bailey, R. (2021). *Navigating Social and Emotional Learning From the Inside Out*. Harvard Graduate School of Education. <https://doi.org/10.59656/YD-OS5671.001>
- Rhodes, J. E. (2004). The critical ingredient: Caring youth-staff relationships in after-school settings. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2004(101), 145–161. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.75>