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# ADAPTING THE SKILLS4LIFE (S4L) RESOURCE FOR DIVERSE YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITY SETTINGS

## Recommendations and Companion Guide

This guide provides recommendations and guidance for adapting the free, open-source Skills4Life (S4L) social-emotional learning (SEL) resource for diverse youth-serving settings beyond traditional classrooms. It aims to support community-based organizations in effectively modifying and implementing the S4L resource to meet the varied needs of late adolescents, ensuring the resource is accessible, engaging, and relevant across a wide range of contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE S4L RESOURCE

### About S4L

**Skills4Life (S4L)** is a comprehensive social-emotional learning (SEL) resource designed for youth and available in both official languages. Originally developed as a classroom-based resource, S4L supports educators in fostering essential SEL skills among their students.

**Collaborative Development Approach:** The creation of S4L was a collaborative effort spanning over 10 years, involving mental health experts, educators, and researchers. This initiative was a partnership between the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), the Ontario Ministry of Education's School Mental Health Ontario initiative, and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.

**Youth Engagement and Feedback:** Youth played a key role in shaping S4L through consultations during the development process and by providing valuable feedback during the program's evaluation. Their contributions helped ensure that S4L is relevant, practical, and effective in meeting the needs of young learners.



## S4L Highlights

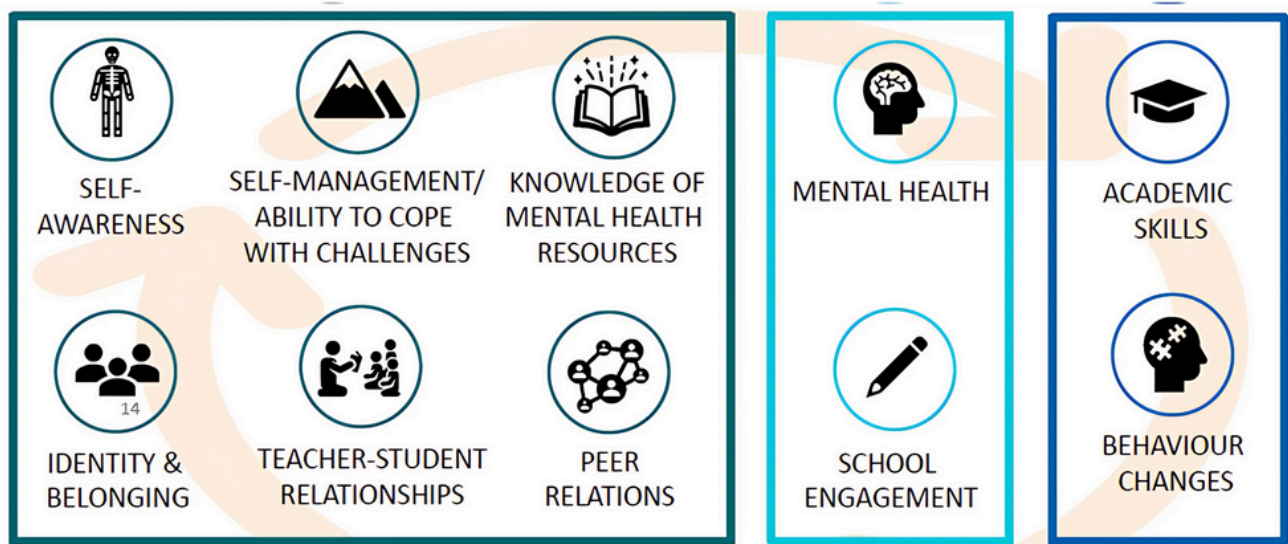
- Consists of a series of five bilingual 60-minute modules.
- Designed to integrate seamlessly into the Grade 10 Career Studies course in Ontario high schools.
- Grounded in research on SEL skill development.
- Reviewed and vetted by practicing teachers and clinicians, as well as youth.
- Developed using an identity-affirming and culturally-responsive approach.
- Specifically tailored to the developmental needs of older adolescents (ages 15 to 17).
- Stands apart from traditional SEL programs, which are often children's programs adjusted for older audiences and tend to result in limited adolescent engagement (Yeager, 2017).

For an in-depth perspective on S4L's development, design, and collaborative approach, see our published [article](#) in the *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*.

## Intended Outcomes of S4L

S4L aims to **enhance the social-emotional competencies** of youth, **encompassing self-awareness, self-management, coping skills, and emotional regulation.**

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, research indicates that these improvements can lead to better mental health, stronger relationships, increased school engagement, and enhanced academic performance (Clarke et al., 2021; Duncan et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2022; Greenberg et al., 2017; Jangmo et al., 2020; Yang & Bear, 2018; Zhang et al., 2023).



## S4L Resource Overview

- S4L lessons address topics such as promoting mattering, exploring identity and strengths, communication and conflict resolution, understanding stress, and managing transitions in school and the workplace.
- S4L focuses on promoting and protecting youth mental health and well-being, especially during times of transition.
- S4L helps youth navigate towards their preferred futures.
- S4L aims to build lifelong coping skills for navigating work, school, family, and personal transitions.



## S4L Lessons Overview

LESSON	CORE CONTENT	SEL SKILL	LEARNING GOALS
<b>Lesson 1</b> Promoting Mattering for Self and Others	Exploring the importance of mattering to self and others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-awareness and sense of identity</li> <li>Positive motivation and perseverance skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To demonstrate understanding of mattering and its connection to well-being</li> <li>To practice skills that contribute to creating appositive and inclusive culture that promotes mattering for oneself and others</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 2</b> Exploring Identity and Acknowledging Strengths	Exploring the importance of self-awareness and strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-awareness and sense of identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To identify personal interests, roles, goals, and strengths</li> <li>To connect identified assets/strengths to decision making and personal well-being</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 3</b> Communication and Conflict Resolutions	Exploring the importance of effective communication and conflict resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Healthy relationships</li> <li>Identify and manage emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To develop effective communication skills and understand their importance in personal and professional relationships</li> <li>To apply strategies for resolving conflict in a constructive and respectful manner</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 4</b> Understanding Stress and Managing Transitions	Exploring the importance of understanding transition stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and manage emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To normalize stress related to change</li> <li>To increase knowledge needed to care for well-being during times of transition</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 5</b> Managing Stress at School and in the Workplace	Exploring the importance of understanding strategies for personal wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stress management and coping with challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To increase understanding of how well-being strategies can support future goals</li> <li>To improve understanding of when to seek support</li> </ul>

## S4L Implementation and Outcomes

### Testing & Evaluation History

- S4L has undergone structured evaluation to assess its impact on both students and teachers, measuring changes in skills, attitudes, and knowledge. Initial testing began with a pilot program in 2016/2017 involving six Ontario schools, followed by enhancements to the curriculum before a second round of testing in 2023/2024 across three Ontario schools.

### Key Findings

- S4L is relevant, useful, and feasible for classroom delivery.
- Support for implementation is crucial.
- Teachers need sufficient time for learning and preparation.
- Adequate preparation time helps teachers feel comfortable and confident using the S4L resources.

### Promising Outcomes for Youth

- Increased knowledge of SEL concepts.
- Enhanced mental health promotion strategies, including self-management and communication skills.
- Improved sense of belonging and skills development.
- Encouragement of positive coping strategies, such as seeking support.

### Future Evaluation Tools

- Evaluations led to the creation of practical tools for future assessments, including surveys for teachers and students.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW ADAPTATIONS OF S4L



### Availability of S4L Lessons:

The S4L lessons are now freely available [online](#) as a bilingual, open-source, and fully accessible resource. This accessibility allows service providers from youth-serving organizations and community settings to utilize the modules and focus on the components most relevant to their work with youth. However, the current design of S4L is tailored for classroom use, featuring structured, sequential lesson plans, curriculum alignment, and teacher-student interaction.



### Opportunities for S4L Expansion:

There is significant potential to expand S4L's application beyond the classroom environment. This expansion is especially critical given the limited availability of SEL programs targeting older adolescents.

While there are numerous SEL programs for younger children, few address the unique needs of older youth, particularly in fostering positive mental health and coping strategies during life transitions (Williamson et al., 2015).



### S4L Adaptation:

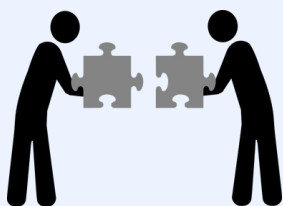
To enhance the versatility of S4L and promote its adoption, it's essential to adapt the program for various settings to maximize its impact on youth mental health and SEL skill development.

A revised S4L, with tailored implementation support, could fill a significant gap in resources for middle-to-late adolescents, who are often underserved by traditional SEL programs that are less effective for this age group.

## ADAPTING S4L FOR NON-SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

### Consultations with Youth-Serving Partners

Drawing on SRDC's existing network, a round of targeted consultations was conducted with key organizations committed to positive youth development.



#### Consultation Goals:

- Explore integration possibilities of S4L into diverse youth-focused environments.
- Address the need for free, adaptable resources for older adolescents.
- Identify effective support strategies for youth-serving organizations to implement adaptations.



#### Youth-Serving Partners:

Consultations were conducted with representatives from:

- Mentor Canada
- Boys and Girls Clubs Canada (BGCC)
- Construction Foundation of British Columbia (CFBC)
- Other community-based youth programs



#### Key Insights from Consultations:

- Valuable insights into possible adaptations of S4L.
- Identified strategies to enhance the resource's accessibility, engagement, and retention among diverse youth groups.
- Key learnings from the consultations are summarized below.



## WHAT WE HEARD: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL SETTINGS

Several key themes regarding the differences between school-based and community-based settings emerged. These themes highlight the **unique needs** of the latter and the **adaptations** required to make S4L resonate with youth in community-based settings.

### Adapting to the Informality of Community Settings

A **significant difference** that emerged was the need for a **more flexible** and **informal approach** in community settings.

*If it smells like school, they can smell it coming a mile away.*

**BGCC Representative**

The key takeaway was to avoid anything that feels too structured or evaluative, which can alienate youth who expect a **more relaxed and responsive environment** from community-based organizations.

The unique strength of community organizations lies in their ability to be **responsive to daily changes** in attendance and youth needs.

*The beauty and magic of a BGC is that we're able to adapt whatever we're doing with the young people that show up on that day.*

**BGCC Representative**

Community settings require programs that can **flex and transform** based on who walks through the door each day, creating environments that feel distinctly different from formal educational spaces.

### Leveraging Mentorship and Collaboration Between Adults and Youth

The dynamic between adults and youth was highlighted as another key difference. In schools, relationships are typically more structured, with a clear instructor-student hierarchy where authority and evaluation play central roles.

In contrast, community-based settings tend to foster **mentorship and collaboration**.

At CFBC, the Wayfinder program reflects this flexible, non-evaluative approach, where personal exploration takes precedence over formal assessment.

*In the school context, there's always an assumption of assessment and evaluation, but in the Wayfinder model whatever they get out of it, is theirs to determine if it worked or not.*

**CFBC Representative**

*In a school environment, you're always gonna have an instructor-student relationship, whereas in the work they like, when [our facilitator] goes in and facilitates, it's much closer to a mentor or role model relationship.*

**CFBC Representative**

*We know how to build it in a way that people are willing to be vulnerable and open up. This ability to **foster vulnerability** and openness is critical in **social-emotional learning (SEL)** programming, where emotional regulation and self-awareness are SEL skills development goals.*

**CFBC Representative**

**Trust-building** is a crucial part of this dynamic, as it allows for a shared experience model. In schools, students can jump straight into lessons, but in community settings, trust must first be established.

This shift in the nature of the relationship means that community-based programs often need to create a safe and **supportive space** before diving into the content.

This focus on **self-directed learning**, free from the pressure of formal evaluation, encourages a more open and **personalized development process** for youth.

Beyond mentorship, self-awareness and **self-reflection** are essential components of career readiness, and programs like S4L integrate these practices to help youth recognize their strengths and areas for growth. By fostering a culture of self-reflection, S4L not only empowers youth to identify their career aspirations but also helps them build the confidence to pursue them.

These skills contribute to personal growth and prepare youth for the challenges they may face in professional environments. Moreover, they play a significant role in **normalizing conversations around mental health**, a key outcome highlighted by youth in both the pilot and recent evaluations of S4L.

Community-based and youth-serving organizations create environments where these discussions and skill developments can thrive, offering a safe space that is essential for the success of S4L and its impact on youth.

## Accounting for Variability in Settings and the Need for Flexibility

The **variability in settings** was also highlighted, including factors such as **group sizes, facility types, and program durations**. One key observation was that one-on-one activities are quite frequent at the start, especially as organizations work to build trust and rapport with the youth.

This variability requires resources like S4L to be modular and flexible, so they can be adapted to different time frames, group sizes, and settings. For example, programs may need to fit into weekly sessions, one-off workshops, or even drop-in formats.

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*The most consistent thing that I could say about clubs is that there's inconsistency because they are doing what works for the kids.*  
**BGCC Representative**

Unlike the standardized nature of school environments, community organizations are constantly adjusting to the unique needs of the youth they serve.

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*It's really flexible for clubs. Clubs felt like they could take it and use it kind of as needed also in different contexts.*  
**BGCC Representative**

This highlights the importance of ensuring that S4L content can be **easily scaled up or down** based on the needs of each specific youth-serving organization.

## Supporting Staff Training and Capacity Challenges

Another important aspect was the challenge of prep time and staff training in youth-serving organizations. Unlike schools, where teachers have structured prep time, youth workers in community organizations often work on an hourly basis and face significant time constraints.

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*One of the bigger challenges we're seeing when we're trying to promote programs is just staff capacity. A lot of the direct service staff work hourly, and so getting them an hour of prep time to run their program is very challenging.*  
**BGCC Representative**

This highlights the importance of resources like S4L, which are specifically designed to require **minimal upfront preparation**, making them easy to integrate into youth-serving organizations.

Many community-based organizations, such as BGCC, have developed innovative strategies to **support staff training**.

For example, BGCC uses a **train-the-trainer** model to equip staff with essential skills and knowledge, collaborating with experts to develop content and offer training sessions across clubs.

It also fosters a **community of practice**, allowing staff to share insights and experiences, which provides ongoing support. Despite the challenges, there is a strong demand for **flexible, shorter training sessions** to accommodate youth workers' schedules. Virtual training has proven effective for reaching staff across time zones, although in-person training typically yields more effective results.

Additionally, BGCC's customized Learning Management System (LMS), which includes **self-directed** content for both staff and youth, has been highly successful in reducing training costs while maintaining high-quality content.

These efforts underscore the importance of resources like S4L that offer **flexible, cost-effective, and easy-to-implement training** solutions that can meet the diverse needs of youth-serving organizations.

## ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF YOUTH IN COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS

### Enhancing Attendance and Engagement

In contrast to schools, where attendance is generally regular and consistent, many youth in community-based programs may not attend every session or may participate intermittently.

This pattern of attendance presents a significant challenge for maintaining consistent engagement.

Representatives from BGCC highlighted that their programs must adapt to this reality by incorporating self-assessment activities and individualized support. By offering youth the chance to **assess their own progress**, these programs make room for personalized development, even when a youth's participation isn't regular.

This need for adaptability is also reflected in the use of online platforms like MyBGC, a youth-facing tool designed to engage participants in a way that's both flexible and interactive.

Active participation, particularly through hands-on, interactive learning, also plays a significant role in sustaining engagement. When staff work alongside youth, it fosters trust and deeper involvement.

Additionally, CFBC emphasizes the journey of learning rather than focusing solely on the end product. This approach highlights the importance of supporting youth through incremental growth, helping them progress in a meaningful and flexible way, rather than only celebrating specific outcomes.

*We've been active for about just about two years now and we're definitely have had lots of learnings along the way about what's engaging and what's not engaging. So I would say our learnings are: Short content videos, very interactive.*

**BGCC Representative**

These kinds of **interactive, short-form content help maintain youth engagement** even when they're unable to attend every session in person.

At CFBC, **creating a safe and supportive environment** is key to engaging youth, as emotional safety is crucial for building trust and maintaining their interest.

### Supporting Youth Transitions and Overcoming Barriers to Success

Youth in community programs and youth-serving organizations often face a range of **complex challenges related to transitions** whether they are leaving high school, entering the workforce, or navigating barriers like **economic** hardship or lack of **access to resources**.

These challenges are particularly acute for youth living in communities that face systemic inequalities, such as rural and remote Indigenous communities, where opportunities for personal and professional development may be limited.

Some youth face significant **mental health challenges** that hinder their ability to engage in programming and make successful transitions into adulthood. Issues like **substance use** and **emotional stress** require more than typical program offerings; they demand **holistic support**, including **mental health resources** and coping strategies. In addition, low self-confidence can prevent youth, particularly in Indigenous communities, from recognizing their own strengths and talents.

“

*A lot of our kids in our communities have amazing passions, talents, great gifts. But it's hard to navigate and move and build it. It's not a lot of support around to keep it going.*

**CFBC Representative**

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Furthermore, youth often face **barriers to employment** such as a lack of job readiness skills, access to job training, or networking opportunities. These gaps in readiness and resources can hinder the ability of youth to successfully transition into employment, making it crucial for programs to focus on **skills development and job preparedness**.

To address this, CFBC's approach focuses on gradually building confidence by encouraging youth to reflect on the strengths of others in their community, creating an environment where they can eventually see their own potential.

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*Limited access to resources is definitely a major thing that they're seeing right now as well as kids just struggling or youth just struggling with the skill upgrading to either academic or employment related.*

**BGCC Representative**

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Another challenge that youth face is **managing the emotional pressures** of these transitions. Youth-serving organization highlighted that **positive peer relationships** and **emotional regulation** are key factors in overcoming these challenges.

This method recognizes that youth may not initially be ready to recognize their own abilities, so the focus is on fostering a supportive, community-centered reflection process.

By teaching skills like self-regulation, **understanding body triggers**, and **managing risky thinking**, community programs can help youth navigate emotional stress and avoid harmful behaviours.

These life skills are crucial for managing the pressures of entering adulthood and the workforce. By focusing on SEL, community programs can better equip youth with the **resilience** and coping strategies needed to overcome barriers and thrive in their personal and professional lives.

To address these challenges, the S4L resource can play a crucial role in promoting resilience, job readiness, and emotional regulation.

One **CFBC Representative** highlighted the significance of SEL in supporting youth, noting that much of their work with both youth and adults centers on fostering growth and development in these areas.

**SEL programs and resources are essential in helping youth build the personal skills needed to handle workplace demands, manage stress, and navigate emotional difficulties.**

## ALIGNING SEL WITH CAREER READINESS AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

### Examples From Existing Programs

Representatives indicated that the S4L resource is closely aligned with some of the career readiness and skills development programs they offer. Representatives discussed the growing recognition of the importance of SEL skills development and Skills for Success in these types of programs. Specifically, soft skills such as communication, problem solving, adaptability, collaboration, and creativity, are increasingly recognized as being critical for employment success. S4L modules that focus on these soft skills could be integrated into existing career readiness and skills development programs.

**Incorporating SEL skills development into career exploration, career readiness, and internship programs was described as a key strategy to addressing barriers to soft skills development.**

Representatives underscored the importance of giving youth an opportunity to apply SEL skills in tangible ways, and ideally within a workplace setting.

For example, one instructor in a trades training program described how helpful it was to teach SEL skills while specifically emphasizing how learners could then use those skills when working as part of a team on a building project. Supportive employers were also mentioned as critical to the success of programs. One representative pointed out the potential benefit to training employers on SEL as well.

Several examples of specific programs that emphasize essential skills for career readiness were highlighted during consultations. These programs are summarized in the upcoming sections. Understanding the content and delivery mechanisms of these types of programs is useful, because there are clear opportunities to adapt S4L to more readily align with and be integrated into existing programs like these.

Overall, flexibility was described as key. Providing options for programs to integrate SEL into existing practice was suggested as an ideal approach, ranging from small interventions during brief interactions (while recognizing the importance of not “watering down” the resource too much), all the way to more intensive options like a full SEL training program for youth.



## Examples of Career Readiness and Skills Development Programs

### SKILLED 4 SUCCESS

***Skilled 4 Success*** is a “10-week program that provides youth aged 15 – 30 that are facing barriers to employment the opportunity to develop new employment skills through skills training, paid work experience at BGCC, job readiness supports, job shadowing, and mentorship.” Skilled 4 Success was described as an employment program focusing on the transition into the workforce and exploration of different career pathways as youth enter adulthood.

The program is guided by a manual addressing topic areas such as conflict in the workplace and how to build a resume, that can be done individually or in a group setting, along with paid training hours and working hours. The aim of Skilled 4 Success is to provide youth a safe space to gain their first job experience and build their confidence.

Lean On is a program focused on supporting youth through the transition from graduation, providing post-secondary with educational and academic support.

R2 Resilience is a program offered by BGCC and Dr. Michael Ungar to enhance wellbeing among youth experiencing stress and adversity.



### The ReFRAME

***The ReFRAME*** Project “supports people on the path to overcoming multiple obstacles to secure meaningful employment in trades and industry sectors.” ReFRAME takes a collaborative approach rooted in Indigenous wisdom, offering holistic support for BIPOC community members, in partnership with community organizations. ReFRAME focuses on socio-emotional wellbeing, continuous soft skills development, hands-on learning experience, and meaningful work experience.

A priority focus of the program is on individuals who are learning to adapt to [a self-identified] learning disability and/or mental health and substance use issues.

A psychologist is available and facilitates skills development activities focused on social emotional skills from a clinical perspective. While the primary focus of the program is learning skills for apprentices, there is strong recognition that mental wellness is necessary to be able to study and complete training. The interconnectedness of mental wellness and learning was noted.

“How do you find a quiet environment?  
How do you find focus? How do you  
manage stress and exam anxiety and  
study anxiety? There is already, without  
calling it explicitly, a mental health focus.”  
**CFBC Representative**

## Developing Soft Skills to Prepare Youth for the Future

For youth transitioning from high school, soft skills such as resilience, self-regulation, communication, and teamwork are critical to navigating both academic and professional environments. Resources such as S4L and BGCC's R2 Resilience Program emphasize the development of these skills through various activities and approaches.

*We definitely have programs that focus on those skills... we have leadership programs.*

*We have healthy relationship programs... Definitely, it can be in a more formal setting, but I think some of the things that we've really been promoting through our trainings and our resources that are available to clubs is really how to weave it through all that we do at the club and really role model those kinds of things.*

**BGCC Representative**

This approach highlights the importance of integrating soft skills throughout all program activities, ensuring that youth are consistently exposed to these crucial competencies in varied contexts. S4L aligns with this approach by offering flexible, accessible resources that help youth overcome barriers and equip them with the tools necessary to thrive in the workforce and beyond.

Moreover, soft skills such as resilience and teamwork can be fostered in both structured and informal settings.

*If you think about programs like if they're doing a junior basketball, for example, how are they going to facilitate resilience in their basketball program? Well, it's actually, you're going to experience all sorts of things as communication and teamwork... there's a lot of different factors that fit into that basketball program.*

**BGCC Representative**

By incorporating these skills into everyday activities like sports, youth can experience firsthand how to apply resilience and teamwork in real-life situations, which will be essential as they move toward career readiness.

The R2 Resilience Program itself is an example of a dynamic, adaptable framework for building soft skills in youth. Rather than being a rigid curriculum, the program encourages resilience through a lens that can be applied in different contexts.

*It's not meant to be followed sequentially from one beginning to end. It's meant to be focused on different factors of resilience, which are very closely connected to SEL.*

**BGCC Representative**

This approach ensures that youth receive ongoing support for their **emotional development**, helping them adapt to the challenges of transitioning into adulthood and the workforce. S4L can complement this effort to integrate SEL across programming, reinforcing soft skills for long-term success.

Self-regulation is a critical component of soft skills development, not only for youth but also for the adults who support them. As highlighted by BGCC, **emotional regulation is essential for staff to model** and effectively guide youth in managing their emotions and behavior in challenging situations. Programs like Skills Link and Wayfinder emphasize self-awareness and self-reflection, foundational SEL skills that help youth understand their strengths, identify areas for growth, and apply these insights in both their career and personal lives.

## Tailoring Programs to Meet the Diverse Needs of Youth

SEL skills such as self-awareness and self-reflection are integral to guiding youth through their futures, supporting them in navigating challenges and making informed decisions, and S4L can help with its focus on self-regulation and stress management.

As community-based programs strive to support youth from diverse backgrounds, it's crucial that their approaches remain flexible and **responsive to the unique needs of each group**. This adaptability ensures that programs are both effective and meaningful, particularly for youth from varying cultural, socioeconomic, or educational contexts.

One **BGCC Representative** emphasized the importance of this flexibility, noting that the role of the organization is to provide a supportive environment, while allowing local clubs to adapt and **personalize programs to best suit their community's needs**.

“*The S4L resource can help meet the needs of diverse youth populations by focusing on identity-affirming practices, ensuring that youth feel valued and seen for who they are. It includes lessons that emphasize the concept of "mattering," which highlights the importance of individuals feeling seen and valued for who they are.*

**BGCC Representative**

This approach empowers clubs to create **culturally relevant and accessible programming for the youth they serve**. Additionally, obtaining **feedback** from front-line staff plays a vital role in adapting programs to different settings. Staff insights help ensure that programs are **practical and relevant**, allowing for continuous improvement based on their firsthand experience of what works and what doesn't.

This feedback loop not only provides staff with the tools and resources they need but also ensures that programs remain responsive to the evolving needs of the youth they serve.

This approach is particularly relevant for youth from marginalized or underserved backgrounds, such as those in Indigenous communities. By prioritizing identity and strength-based methods, the resource empowers youth from diverse backgrounds to recognize their own value, fostering confidence and a sense of self-efficacy.

For other **community-based youth programs**, the ability to tailor resources is crucial. Representatives explained that resources should be flexible enough for community organizations or staff to modify and adjust based on the needs of the youth, as their circumstances can vary widely within the same program. This flexibility is vital for ensuring that programs meet the specific needs of youth, especially in environments where youth may have a wide range of experiences and challenges.

Having the ability to modify materials based on the unique dynamics of each group ensures that all youth can engage meaningfully with the content and feel seen in their individual circumstances. This is why open-source resources like S4L can be valuable.



## RECOMMENDED ADAPTATIONS FOR YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

Representatives offered actionable recommendations and examples on how to modify the content and delivery of S4L for community-based programs, including practical steps to consider when implementing the resources, and insight into how some of the lessons learned from S4L's previous implementation in classroom settings are still relevant to community-based contexts.

### Adjusting Content, Delivery, and Timing

**Ensuring accessibility of content** was emphasized by representatives who explained the potentially varying levels of emotional readiness as well as prior knowledge of mental health promotion and social emotional learning skills among vulnerable youth across different developmental stages.

Representatives suggested simplifying complex concepts to ensure accessibility of content for youth in order to “meet the kids where they’re at.” (BGCC Representative). Youth workers highlighted the importance of the process and journey of working with vulnerable youth.

They recommended prioritizing engagement, and ensuring the youth remain energetic and responsive to programs overall, rather than hyper-focusing on specific skills, delivery structures, and plans. Being receptive to a group’s readiness was key for program delivery.

*It was more about how we walk with people. How do we get them to the next step? And we built it out from that perspective.*

**BGCC Representative**

**Shortening lessons to fit shorter planning and delivery** time frames was also recommended throughout consultations. Representatives underlined the limited time staff have to prepare programming as well as deliver full modules.

*When I'm going through your [lessons], I like them, but unless staff has the time to prepare for that specific [lesson], it's going to be very hard for them to go through it. If we can give them some easy, quick questions that they can get those group discussions going based on themes, I think that goes a long way.*

**BGCC Representative**

Youth workers saw value in **adapting lesson plans to be conversation-based** because relatability and role modelling were so important for them to successfully work with youth.

Facilitating exchange between youth group participants and youth workers and/or mentors was key for relationship building. Easily accessible and quick discussion prompts based on themes and skills were seen as offering significant value to staff who could then leverage the resource as content became relevant.

*Anything that is quick and easy for them to kind of pull together [...], or even if they're in a program and they're doing something all of a sudden something comes up and they're like, 'Oh yeah, I know that we have this topic or theme in the resource.' They don't necessarily have the time to go get that resource guide, pull through it and select it. So, we're trying to find ways always to make it very easy and quick access that they could adapt, that they can choose from.*

**BGCC Representative**

## Practical Steps for Implementing S4L

### Portable, On-the-Go Tools

Recommended as one strategy to keep the resource practical to support programming in flexible environments. One example suggested was flash cards that staff could carry with them to support both the physical accessibility of activities and discussion prompts as well as adaptability to navigate specific situations “just in time.” A few key informants described the potential applicability and usefulness of the resource in different contexts and scenarios:

*Clubs are sometimes transporting young people...maybe they're picking them up from school or traveling to another location to play basketball. Anything that can be portable...can be activities that are on the go. **BGCC Representative***

When they're looking for an activity, they can use it to shift the energy in the group or create a teaching moment.

**BGCC Representative**

*That's why we like the idea of having a small ring booklet that they can just quickly go through and choose XYZ activities to do with their groups.*

**BGCC Representative**

### Flexible learning through participatory activities or digital tools providing asynchronous learning options

Overall, the key informants described the need to shift away from any heavy reliance on PowerPoint slides towards incorporating more flexible participatory activities for any kind of community-based program. Digital resources, such as self-paced modules, downloadable materials, or gamified online platforms (e.g., online word search), were all suggested to provide youth options to engage with content online for further learning or if they can't attend every session.

### Building SEL skills capacity among youth workers and mentors

Key informants outlined the need to first raise awareness among youth workers and mentors to get their attention and interest, followed by offering training to present the resource to community-based organizations. They noted the “main mechanism for promoting SEL is how mentors are trained”, underscoring the range of skills, training, and backgrounds of youth workers and mentors working directly with youth.

The extent and nature (e.g., online or in-person, group or individual) of training and orientation offered by community organizations also varies widely, making training crucial to develop a baseline understanding of SEL skills across staff and volunteers. Going further to support youth workers and mentors, one program team member recommended clearly outlining and matching content to developmental ages as well as life events and transitions. Online resources (e.g., mobile device application) for youth workers and mentors and electronic reminders (e.g., weekly inbox tip) were also suggested as another strategy to make the resource content available as needed to maintain its relevance and to easily integrate the resource as another asset on existing online platforms.

## Moving forward: Expand S4L Beyond Schools

### Lesson 1: Keep the focus on **relationship building** and **mental health promotion** using a strengths-based approach

While consultations yielded important insights on the unique needs of youth, staff, and volunteers within a community-based programming context, there were many similarities drawn from the lessons learned within a school environment.

The focus on relationship building, normalizing mental health promotion, employing a strengths-based approach, and reducing stigma by **normalizing conversations about mental health** were considered highly relevant to the community-based context. Representatives we spoke with emphasized that many of the challenges youth face (e.g., building relationships, managing mental health) are similar in both school and out-of-school environments.

One program staff member nuanced the additional focus they had:

“*The transitions that the youth at the clubs are experiencing are the ones that they're experiencing at school as well. It's those big life transitions... But I think one of the things that we really focus on is not just those transitions, but barriers that might be experienced.*

**BGCC Representative**

”

### Lesson 2: Prioritize creating a **safe space**

In both school and youth-serving organizations, there is a **need to create a safe space**, particularly when talking about mental health, SEL skills, and navigating transitions. As in school-based implementation of S4L, **building relationships and a foundation of trust with youth** were considered fundamental to having productive and respectful discussions about potentially sensitive topic areas.

Another key lesson learned was fostering connection between peers and program participants as critical for positive discussions where youth may feel vulnerable or resistant to sharing their personal experiences or opinions.

### Lesson 3: Remember to focus on **growth** over the long-term

Focusing on a growth mindset was another key similarity with school-based implementation.

Despite any previous experience or familiarity with mental health concepts or SEL skills, encouraging a growth mindset also took a strengths-based approach, recognizing that using SEL skills and maintaining mental health and well-being is an ongoing and lifelong process for everyone as they navigate adversity throughout life.

“*It's a long-term process realizing that you're growing and you're working on those skills your entire life, as you navigate different circumstances and different events in your world. Your skill sets that you might develop as a 19-year-old are going to be a different set of skill sets that you continue to grow and develop in your 30s and 40s, but you're still growing and developing those skill sets.*

”



## CONCLUSION

Youth-serving organizations can currently access and tailor the S4L resources at <https://www.srdc.org/skills-4-life-resources/> to meet their unique needs.

Looking ahead, SRDC plans to collaborate with national partners to further expand the distribution of the S4L resource and promote its adaptation for different settings, fostering a network that can support youth in a variety of contexts, from schools to community centres and beyond.

For more information, contact us at [info@srdc.org](mailto:info@srdc.org).



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