

# Skills for Life (S4L) Companion Guide

## WHAT IS SKILLS FOR LIFE?

*Skills for Life (S4L)* was created in response to growing concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of Canadian youth, particularly when transitioning from high school to further education, work, or other pathways. It was designed as a universal, school-based resource for educators to support the development of older adolescents aged 15-16 years with their social-emotional learning skills, and mental health and wellbeing more broadly.

*S4L* focuses on skills such as stress management and coping, healthy relationships, positive motivation and perseverance, identification and management of emotions, self-awareness and sense of identity, and critical and creative thinking. Specifically, *S4L* is designed to help youth develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes foundational to positive mental health and resilience; language to talk about emotions, identity, and strengths; and the ability to recognize when they need support, and the skills to seek support effectively. The resource comprises of five 60-minute lesson plans that are aligned with the Ontario Grade 10 Careers curriculum and have been field-tested successfully in Ontario with Career Studies teachers.

*S4L* was developed collaboratively by mental health experts, educators, and researchers. Youth also provided their input to be developmentally-tailored to the social-emotional needs of Grade 10 youth and support their wellbeing at school, at home, and in the workplace. It was developed with a strengths-based approach and through an identity-affirming and culturally safe and responsive lens. In Ontario, the resource fits within a school based multi-tiered system of support, where *S4L* is designed to be a universal approach which is good for all (for more details: <https://smho-smso.ca/school-administrators/think-in-tiers-about-student-mental-health>).

## WHO IS THIS COMPANION GUIDE FOR?

This guide is meant for anyone who wishes to implement *S4L* in their classroom or school. This guide will provide valuable insights and practical strategies for effectively implementing *S4L* as part of a school's youth mental health promotion strategy.

While *S4L* was initially designed as a resource for teachers delivering the Ontario Grade 10 Careers curriculum, it can be adjusted for use in other jurisdictions.

In the Ontario evaluation of *S4L*, we found that the resource helped create supportive and inclusive environments for youth. In particular, *S4L* may be most helpful for those wishing to: create positive shifts in relationship dynamics among youth peers and between youth and adults, including the use of more effective communication strategies; as well as increase youths' knowledge and use of strategies for stress and self-management, self-care, and social support.

### THE CASE OF ONTARIO

*"I think I was a little kinder to my kids, to be honest. I had a great group of students and they were always kind, but maybe they were even a little bit more inclusive after that lesson...I did notice some of the guys saying, 'How are you doing?' and stuff like that. I think they took some of that to heart and tried to reach out."*  
– Grade 10 Careers Teacher



## WHAT ARE SOME TIPS TO HELP IMPLEMENT S4L IN MY SCHOOL OR CLASSROOM?

The success of any mental health promotion initiative depends on the effectiveness of its delivery, and the environment in which the lessons are taught. While the *S4L* lesson plans incorporate reflection points to help teachers to provide supportive and differentiated instruction, we include below some tips and lessons learned from the Ontario implementation of *S4L* that can set you up for success. **Additional tips can be found in the introduction to the *S4L* resource.**

**SEEK SUPPORT:** It is important to create safe learning environments when working with youth where they feel like they belong and that it is okay to talk about mental health and wellbeing. Over and over, both teachers and youth in Ontario told us that normalizing discussions of stress and wellbeing was one of the things they valued most about *S4L*.

To create a safe learning environment where youth can express themselves freely, teachers and other adults working directly with youth need to feel comfortable and confident about delivering the material. Where additional help may be necessary, both in helping youth seek support and in making sure that you as the adult working directly with youth are well-supported in delivering mental health promotion resources, it is important to know where and how to seek out this support. It may help to identify individuals at the district or board level (e.g., mental health leads) who can facilitate the implementation of *S4L* in schools and provide guidance when students may need to seek additional help.

### THE CASE OF ONTARIO

*We're normalizing mental health help and all of these - learning about yourself and knowing how to manage your stress - I think it's very important. Skills for, especially kids at a young age need help with [that]. I definitely felt comfortable hearing my teacher talk about things that I've experienced, where I felt like it was only just me experiencing those things... It's really nice to talk about it with others... For me, it felt like I was just being heard, in a way."* – Grade 10 Student

**IDENTIFY A SCHOOL CHAMPION AND IMPLEMENTATION TEAM:** Champions are essential for kickstarting and supporting ongoing, sustainable implementation efforts that last year after year. They can be part of an implementation team to ensure that, even if the champion leaves, the institutional knowledge about the implementation stays within the school. Champions and implementation teams can also be a great resource for staff members who may need additional support. A champion could be you, your administrator, or a staff member whose role includes promoting youth mental health, such as a counselor or a careers/physical education teacher.

**IDENTIFY ALIGNMENT BETWEEN *S4L* AND OTHER MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING RESOURCES OR PROGRAMS:** Think of *S4L* as a complementary or booster resource that enhances and reinforces the social-emotional skills youth develop through other initiatives. By aligning *S4L* with existing mental health and wellbeing strategies (e.g., curriculum strands in Grade 9 physical education), you can create a cohesive approach that maximizes the impact on youths' wellbeing and academic success. This integration ensures youth receive consistent and comprehensive support in developing essential skills across various contexts over time.



## IDENTIFY AREAS OF ALIGNMENT BETWEEN THE LEARNING GOALS OF *S4L* AND YOUR

**BROADER CURRICULUM:** You may want to consider how the implementation of *S4L* aligns with your own teaching priorities and with district or province-level priorities and objectives.

By embedding *S4L* lessons within the curriculum, you also create opportunities for youth to apply social-emotional skills in their daily academic tasks. This approach fosters a more enriching and supportive learning environment for all youth. It promotes a holistic approach to education, where cognitive and emotional development are equally prioritized, preparing youth to handle both academic challenges and real-world situations effectively.

**PLAN:** Research shows that how confident teachers feel in delivering social-emotional learning instruction can be crucial for how effective it can be. As you use your professional judgement to decide when to introduce *S4L*, consider making sure there is enough time for youth to really engage in conversations about stressors and mental health, since these were identified as the most valuable parts of the Ontario implementation process.

### THE CASE OF ONTARIO

In Ontario, *S4L* was integrated into the revised 2019 Career Studies Course (GLC20). *S4L* learning goals were aligned with three main curriculum expectations: developing skills, strategies, and habits for long-term success and wellbeing (Strand A); exploring the world of work and necessary skills, including digital media's impact on career opportunities (Strand B); and planning for postsecondary goals, including financial literacy and budgeting (Strand C). Students engaged in decision-making, self-assessment, and practical planning to prepare for their future educational and career paths across all three strands of GLC20.

To ensure *S4L* is as effective as possible, it is important to think about how often and for how long you implement it, as well as how many youth are involved. We recommend teaching the *S4L* lessons chronologically because the lessons were intentionally developed and designed to allow youth to build upon their learning progressively. However, we recognize there may be times when you may decide to adjust the order (e.g., if a topic aligns more closely with current classroom activities). We recommend re-ordering lessons over skipping them altogether. Another strategy would be to break-up the lessons into multiple components if needed. For example, in Ontario, teachers sometimes split the 1-hour lesson into two halves to accommodate more discussion (e.g., by moving the activity and wrap-up to the next day).

While we recommended teaching the *S4L* lessons as-is, it is possible to adapt examples and the pace to accommodate youth. The key is to ensure youth are learning the key messages in each lesson and have the opportunity to develop and practice skills through interactive activities. Beyond conveying the key messages, feel free to exercise your professional judgment and knowledge of your students and school to implement the lessons in the way that best suits your needs and priorities. As with other lessons, you can gauge youth engagement and gather youth feedback to adjust activities accordingly. Remember, you know your students best.

## HOW CAN I GAUGE IF *S4L* IS WORKING FOR MY SCHOOL?

**I AM AN ADMINISTRATOR OR IMPLEMENTATION TEAM MEMBER.** You may want to gather feedback on *S4L* from teachers and youth, such as:

- What are barriers and facilitators teachers are experiencing in effectively teaching *S4L*?
- How comfortable do teachers feel with teaching *S4L*?



- How frequently and consistently are *S4L* lessons are being taught?
- How engaging did teachers and youth find the material? What aspects of *S4L* did they most value?
- How well does *S4L* align with other social-emotional learning and mental health promotion initiatives within your school?

When seeking feedback, consider the following:

- You may wish to seek feedback immediately after teachers have completed teaching *S4L*, and additional feedback after youth have had time to practice strategies.
- Empower folks to share feedback without adding to their workload. Share your findings.
- Anonymity and confidentiality are key to getting honest feedback.
- Look for trends and tweak strategies to keep improving how you deliver the resource and aligning it with your school goals.

**I WORK DIRECTLY WITH YOUTH.** As you deliver *S4L* with youth, you may wish to reflect on how the *S4L* lessons are going. Topics for reflection could include:

- What went well in terms of youth engagement and understanding?
- How effectively did the activities and discussions support youths' social-emotional skills?
- Are there any areas where youth seemed particularly challenged or disengaged?
- Did the lesson flow smoothly, or were there points where adjustments were needed?
- What feedback did youth provide, and how can it inform future lesson planning?

## WHO CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

For more information about how *S4L* was developed to work within Ontario's multi-tiered system of support, please contact Dr. Alexandra Fortier, SMH-ON consultant for innovation, scale up and research mobilization, at [afortier@smho-smso.ca](mailto:afortier@smho-smso.ca).

For more information about the *S4L* resource, or if you are interested in using *S4L* in a different setting than the education system, such as youth development NGOs, skills development programs, and employment support programs please contact Dr. Deanna Smith, SMH-ON Area Lead for mental health promotion, at [dswift@smho-smso.ca](mailto:dswift@smho-smso.ca). **Important note, *S4L* is designed as a mental health promotion resource, not a therapeutic tool.**

To learn more about how you can use *S4L* in your applied work with youth, including information on tools and measurement, please contact Geneviève Mák, Principal Research Associate at the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) at [gmak@srdc.org](mailto:gmak@srdc.org).

More details can also be found on the SRDC website at <https://www.srdc.org/s4l/>.

