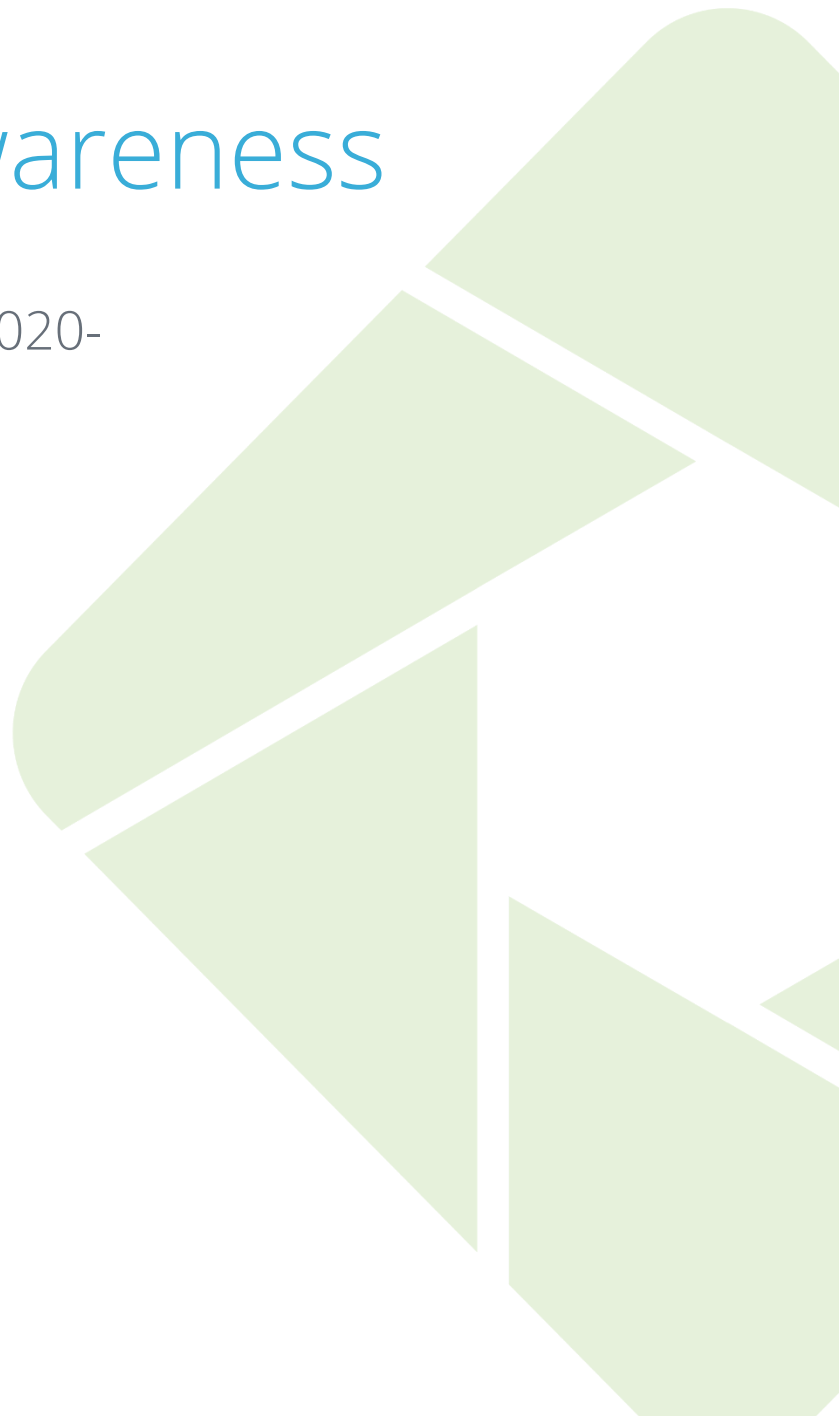# DESSA
Comprehensive SEL System

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STRATEGIES GUIDE:

Self-Awareness

-2020-

Self-Awareness

A child's realistic understanding of their strengths and limitations and consistent desire for self-improvement.

What is Self-Awareness?

Self-Awareness refers to a child's realistic understanding of their strengths and limitations and consistent desire for self-improvement. Children who are self-aware can identify areas in which they succeed, along with areas in which they may need some extra practice. These children articulate their feelings and are conscious of how they are affecting those around them. Children who demonstrate Self-Awareness may appear confident, considerate, and open to constructive feedback. For example, a child who identifies that he is having difficulty mastering a challenging concept and turns to his teacher for additional help demonstrates Self-Awareness. This child is able to recognize his need for extra instruction and reach out to fulfil this need. Several concepts are related to the construct of Self-Awareness, such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-concept, metacognition, and emotional intelligence. These related terms may refer to aspects of the DESSA Self-Awareness scale and represent competencies that require many of the same skills that a child may use to develop and demonstrate an awareness of their strengths and emotions.

Self-Awareness is closely related to other social-emotional competencies measured by the DESSA, such as the competency of Optimistic Thinking. This is reflected in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)'s definitions of key social-emotional competencies, which define Self-Awareness as, "The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset." (CASEL, 2012, pg. 9). While CASEL embeds optimism into its definition of Self-Awareness, the developers of the DESSA instead chose to isolate the optimism-related behaviors from this construct in a dedicated Optimistic Thinking scale. Because Optimistic Thinking and Self-Awareness are distinct skills with different strategies for improvement, this separation allows raters to independently assess and promote skill growth in each domain. Self-Awareness is also a key precursor to the DESSA competency of Self-Management, which is defined as, "A child's success in controlling their emotions and behaviors to complete a task or succeed in a new or challenging situation." Because students

must first recognize and understand their emotions in order to manage them, Self-Awareness skills are critical for success in Self-Management.

The DESSA for grades kindergarten through 8 (DESSA K-8) and DESSA-High School Edition for grades 9-12 (DESSA-HSE) measure Self-Awareness with the following items.

DESSA K-8	DESSA-HSE
41. make accurate statements about events in her/his life?	24. make accurate statements about himself/herself?
49. teach another person to do something?	29. teach someone how to do something?
57. ask questions to clarify what he/she did not understand?	34. ask questions when he/she did not understand something?
58. show an awareness of her/his personal strengths?	36. ask somebody for feedback?
59. ask somebody for feedback?	42. show an awareness of her/his personal strengths?
62. describe how he/she was feeling?	
63. give an opinion when asked?	

While each item on the DESSA Self-Awareness scale indicates an ability to understand oneself, items 41, 49, 58, 62, and 63 (DESSA K-8) and items 24, 29, and 42 (DESSA-HSE) specifically indicate a *realistic understanding of strengths and limitations*, whereas items 57 and 59 (DESSA K-8) and items 34 and 36 (DESSA-HSE) specifically indicate a *consistent desire for self-improvement*. The developers of the DESSA chose to focus on these two domains of Self-Awareness rather than focusing on emotional awareness. This decision was made to ensure the DESSA Self-Awareness scale's items would be limited to observable, objective behaviors that raters (educators and parents) could report upon. While emotional awareness is an important dimension of Self-Awareness, it is primarily an internal state and is difficult to observe objectively.

The Different Aspects of Self-Awareness

As you use the Self-Awareness strategies, you'll notice that they may focus on one or more aspects of the competency. As mentioned above, we have identified two aspects of Self-Awareness: *realistic understanding of strengths and limitations* and *consistent desire for self-improvement*. You will see that awareness of oneself is at the heart of each of these interrelated aspects, which may be demonstrated by identifying subject areas which come easily, recognizing emotions and deciding how to cope with them, and looking to adults for guidance on how to improve.

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REALISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

An important aspect of Self-Awareness is a child's *realistic understanding of his or her strengths and limitations.* In school, children are asked to complete assignments and activities both independently and in groups, while at home, children are expected to complete homework assignments and contribute to a peaceful home environment. These tasks often require an understanding of one's strengths and limitations, both academic and emotional. A child may become bored and distracted during a lesson on fractions, but his ability to identify a limitation in the subject area is an example of Self-Awareness and will aid him in getting the assistance he requires instead of daydreaming through math class. These tasks also require children to understand that their own strengths and limitations may differ from their classmates'. This will ensure that a child does not become discouraged when others finish a class reading before him or frustrated when his teacher spends time reviewing a concept that is familiar to him. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations also facilitates group work: for example, a group of children who can each identify their individual strengths can more efficiently assign tasks for a group project. Children who are aware of their emotions work better together, as they have learned to recognize negative emotions such as anger and frustration and are better able to think through these emotions before expressing them in potentially destructive ways. At home, children who demonstrate Self-Awareness are better equipped to complete homework and projects because they understand how their strengths and limitations relate to their assignments: for example, a student who knows she needs to set aside some extra time for reading assignments may decide against going to her friend's house every evening the week before a book report is due, and may instead set aside some evenings to dedicate to reading.

CONSISTENT DESIRE FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT

A second aspect of Self-Awareness is the student's *consistent desire for self-improvement.* In school and at home, children may face a variety of situations that are unfamiliar or challenging, such as beginning a new topic in class, learning to play a musical instrument, helping Mom or Dad with a new chore around the house, or getting along with a new group of classmates. Each of these situations presents a challenge; however, to the self-aware child, each also presents an opportunity for improvement. Children demonstrating Self-Awareness will be able to consider the challenge that a new situation presents, evaluate how their own strengths and limitations relate to the situation, and

look for ways to use the new challenge to improve themselves in some way. These children will not find challenging situations daunting or discouraging but will instead become excited at the prospect of learning something new. A desire for self-improvement is not only important in school-aged children; but is also a highly valuable trait in high school, higher education, and adulthood.

Additionally, to effectively navigate these new situations, children must manage their emotions by staying calm. Children demonstrating Self-Awareness will be able to pause, notice their initial emotional response, and consider whether a shift to a more appropriate behavior is needed. This aspect of Self-Awareness is built upon by the development of Self-Management skills, which help children adjust and settle themselves to better focus on learning and on positive interactions with others. Although developing competence in Self-Awareness and learning the skills of Self-Management take time and intentional practice to apply, they are essential for success both in and out of the classroom.

The Development and Importance of Self-Awareness

SELF-AWARENESS VS. SELF-ESTEEM

At first glance, many of the elements of Self-Awareness may seem similar to the familiar concept of self-esteem. However, there are critical differences between these two constructs. Self-Awareness is demonstrated when a child is able to make accurate statements about her abilities, her feelings, and about events in her life. Alternatively, self-esteem refers to the child's ability to see herself as valuable, worthy, and important (Blascovich & Tomaka 1991). Self-esteem measures how *positively* the child views herself, while Self-Awareness measures how *accurately* the child perceives her own abilities. Therefore, Self-Awareness as measured by the DESSA is more similar to the construct self-concept, which is a more inclusive term encompassing all of the ways in which a child views themself, not only those which affect their feelings of self-worth (Blascovich & Tomaka 1991). For example, a student may be able to identify that he struggles with memorizing the capital cities of all fifty states. This impacts the student's self-concept, because he is able to identify an area in which he is struggling. However, its impact on his self-esteem depends on the child himself – how much importance does he place on his accomplishment in geography, and to what degree is that accomplishment tied to his self-worth?

While the DESSA Self-Awareness strategies may focus more on accuracy of self-perception than on increasing self-worth, that does not mean that a child's self-esteem will not benefit from these strategies. Self-esteem *can* play a role in Self-Awareness: for example, a child with low self-esteem may have trouble accurately assessing her own strengths, which could result in her under-estimating her abilities. Giving this child the skills to better perceive her own strengths can in turn improve her self-image and boost her confidence. By helping students develop Self-Awareness, you help them reduce their under-estimation of themselves, as well as their over-estimation of their abilities.

IMPORTANCE OF SELF-AWARENESS

The ability to understand one's own strengths, emotions, and impact is crucial for children and adults of all ages. As stated by researchers William McGuire and Alice Padawer-Singer, "What we think about ourselves is probably the central concept in our conscious lives" (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). Our self-image is one of our earliest means of perception and has incredible ability to shape how we interact with the world. Imagine a young child who repeatedly engages in aggressive play without recognizing it causes him anger and agitation, a school-aged child who falls behind in math class because she can't quite pinpoint where she's struggling and ask for help, or an adult who decides against applying for a promotion because he does not realize he has the skills to succeed. In each of these examples, a lack of Self-Awareness is negatively impacting how the subject acts. By developing Self-Awareness, the young child could learn to engage in activities which make him happy and calm, the school-aged child could ask for help and improve her math grade, and the adult may choose to apply for the promotion and land his dream job.

It is important for teachers to foster Self-Awareness, especially emotional awareness, as children adapt to elementary school. Research shows that emotional understanding significantly affects how children adapt to the school environment: children who can better understand and articulate their own feelings are less likely to exhibit behavioral problems in the early elementary years (Cook, Greenberg, & Kusche, 1994) and are more successful at connecting with their classmates (Garner and Estep, 2001; Cassidy et al., 1992). A child who has a solid foundation in understanding her emotions will be set up for success in school and in her personal life, as she will be equipped to regulate her behavior and develop healthy relationships with her peers. In order to promote the best

outcomes for young students, teachers should help students develop an understanding of their emotions, as well as their strengths and limitations.

DEVELOPING SELF-AWARENESS IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children are not born with an inherent Self-Awareness. Instead, awareness of the self develops as children learn to contextualize themselves within the world around them (Rochat, 2003; Kagan, 1981). The ability to recognize oneself as a distinct individual with unique thoughts, feelings, and experiences is a key developmental milestone with crucial implications for later development and outcomes. The early development of Self-Awareness in young children emerges with the awareness of the physical body, with children first expressing an awareness of their physical selves through recognition of their mirrored reflections around 18 months of age (Bertenthal & Fischer, 1978). Initial development of emotional awareness soon follows, as preschool-aged children begin to learn the names for the emotions and sensations they experience (Rochat, 2003; Denham & Couchoud, 1990). In many ways, early Self-Awareness develops concurrently with an awareness of others, paving the way for the development of empathy (Asendorpf, Warkentin, & Baudonniere, 1996). An awareness of peers' and adults' emotions and reactions also informs the development and understanding of "self-conscious emotions" such as pride, guilt, and embarrassment – these emotions emerge as children learn to anticipate the emotions of others in reaction to their behavior (Lewis, 2011; Lewis, Sullivan, Stanger, & Weiss, 1989).

The groundwork for more complex Self-Awareness is laid in early elementary school. By kindergarten, children begin to develop a deeper understanding of the causes behind their feelings and the steps they can take to anticipate and alleviate negative emotions (Levine, 1995; Davis, Levine, Lench, & Quas, 2010). At this age, children also begin to develop a better understanding of their cognitive processes and can better monitor how they think and learn (Schneider, 2008). By kindergarten, the biological basis for physical, emotional, and cognitive Self-Awareness is firmly in place, making this an ideal time to promote skill growth in the area of Self-Awareness.

While the early development of Self-Awareness is largely biological, there is evidence to support the importance of early experiences on the development of emotional and cognitive Self-Awareness. Research suggests that discussing emotions helps young children better understand their feelings (Brown & Dunn, 1996). Adults can support children's development of emotional awareness

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by having conversations with them about their feelings in the moment ("I see you are crying. Are you feeling sad right now?") and the causes of those feelings ("Sometimes we get sad when our friends have to go home"). Such conversations help children connect the physical expression (crying) to the emotion (sadness) and connect the emotion to its root cause (a friend going home after a day of fun). Much of children's early emotional understanding comes from observing and synthesizing the reactions of others (Denham, 2007; Michalson & Lewis, 1985). As such, adults can promote children's development of emotional understanding by explicitly naming their own emotions and describing the causes behind them ("I feel happy because the sun is shining brightly today"). Adults can also use this practice to support the development of empathy by describing how children's emotions make them feel ("I see you are crying and know you are feeling sad. When you are sad, I feel sad too"). Research shows that a warm and supportive environment is key to helping children understand and express their own emotions (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994). Adults can support the development of emotional awareness by avoiding angry responses to expressions of emotion and by supporting and encouraging children as they work to name and express their feelings.

Adults can also support children in developing an understanding of their strengths and limitations. One way that parents and caregivers can support children's understanding of their capabilities is through the delivery of kind and direct feedback. Research shows that the regular delivery of differentiated and specific information about a student's progress or skills increases the accuracy of the student's personal skill perception, even among elementary students (Schunk, 1981, 1995). In addition to feedback delivered in the moment, teachers might set aside time for more structured "student-teacher" conferences once or twice a year, during which the teacher and student can engage in an open discussion about the student's skills and areas for improvement. In all scenarios, feedback should be delivered in a way that recognizes students' efforts and promotes attainable skill development.   Adults can also promote students' Self-Awareness through *directed reflection,* or adult-led activities that support self-exploration (Paris & Winograd, 2003). Activities such as guided journaling can help students think through which subjects or concepts in which they demonstrate strength, and subjects that provide opportunities for growth. This practice can help foster a desire for self-improvement and can guide students in setting goals for future growth (a Goal-Directed Behavior skill). Guided self-assessment, perhaps completed in conjunction with the distribution of formal report cards or progress reports, can also build students' awareness of their own strengths and areas for improvement (Schunk, 1995).

Adults can support students by giving them tools to reflect on their emotions, strengths, and areas for improvement and then teaching them specific strategies for self-monitoring throughout the day. They can also provide encouragement and reinforcement when children express an awareness of their capabilities or emotions in the moment and can support or guide children working through particularly difficult scenarios. The items on the DESSA refer to observable behaviors and can be used to aid adults in identifying situations which offer children the opportunity to demonstrate Self-Awareness (i.e., "make accurate statements about events in his or her life," and "give an opinion when asked"). Adults can use these items to guide them in introducing more opportunities for children to demonstrate Self-Awareness in the classroom or in the home. While the Self-Awareness strategies included in the DESSA Comprehensive SEL System are presented with developmental adaptations for the primary, intermediate, and middle school grades, it is important for adults to be mindful of each student's unique developmental level. Age, maturity, life events and other personal and social factors have important influences on children's abilities to self-reflect. In particular, some children may need additional support in identifying and naming emotions before they are able to recognize these emotions within themselves.

The Benefits of Self-Awareness

Self-Awareness, like all social-emotional competencies, is necessary for success in all areas of children's lives. With this in mind, the DESSA Growth Strategies were written to include activities for developing children's social and emotional skills in the home, at school, and in the out-of-school time program. The benefits of Self-Awareness can be observed across these environments and contribute to student success at present and in the future.

IN THE HOME

Self-aware children are likely to contribute to a cooperative and peaceful home environment. In the home, children with strong Self-Awareness skills are able to develop and maintain high-quality relationships with family members: the ability to understand and express emotions at a young age tends to lead to more positive interactions with siblings, especially older siblings (Brown & Dunn, 1996). Emotional awareness can help siblings communicate effectively, bridge age gaps, and find common ground, allowing them to interact more peacefully. This allows parents to spend less time

moderating arguments and more time engaging in positive, high-quality interaction with their children. In this way, emotional awareness supports peaceful interaction within families.

Self-Awareness also cuts down on arguing and contributes to a peaceful home environment by helping children recognize and cope with emotions in healthy ways. Though emotion regulation is a key Self-Management skill, children must first be able to identify their emotions in order to self-manage. Research has shown that even very young children have the ability to consciously reverse negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, and fear (Davis, Levine, Lench, & Quas, 2010). By age six, many children understand that changing their thoughts, expectations, or goals in a situation can change how they feel (Davis, Levine, Lench, & Quas, 2010). When children are able to identify and articulate their emotions, they can take action to effectively cope with them. Children who are self-aware are more likely to manage stress, anger, and other negative emotions in healthy ways, leading to fewer outbursts and arguments.

Self-Awareness skills are highly related to self-regulation and self-monitoring in children. Self-aware children who are aware of their own areas of strength and areas of need are able to complete homework and chores more efficiently by developing their own personal method for completing each task, exerting self-discipline, and monitoring and adjusting as they go (Zimmerman, 2002a). A child who is able to effectively evaluate his aptitude for spelling, for example, can use that evaluation to determine how much time he should devote to studying for his upcoming spelling test. Self-Awareness can also help him avoid procrastination and apply self-discipline, allowing him to efficiently utilize the time he set aside for studying (Ferrari, 2001; Zimmerman, 2002b).

IN THE SCHOOL OR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM

An understanding of strengths and limitations can greatly affect a student's ability to complete his or her schoolwork or other learning activities. Children who realistically perceive their academic ability are more likely to enjoy and persist at school tasks and report feeling curious throughout the school day (Miserandino, 1996). Meanwhile, children with similar academic abilities who do *not* realistically perceive their strengths report feeling more anxious, angry, and bored during the school day, and are more likely to avoid, ignore, or fake schoolwork (Miserandino, 1996). Children who exhibit Self-Awareness skills come to school feeling prepared in what they already know, recognizing what they still need to learn, and understanding how they might best go about learning this material.

Self-Awareness is critical in helping students show up to class and their out-of-school time programs ready to learn.

Children who display Self-Awareness skills tend to be engaged in lessons and activities and exhibit less disruptive behavior, contributing to a peaceful and organized classroom or program environment. These children exhibit fewer attention problems and are better able to focus in the classroom (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2012). As children progress in school, the ability to focus on lessons becomes increasingly important. Children with attention problems tend to have lower academic achievement across subjects (Polderman, Boomsma, Bartels, Verhulst, & Huizink, 2010; Barriga et al., 2002) and can contribute to disorganization in the classroom environment. Teachers and out-of-school time professionals with students who are better able to focus will likely spend less time managing student behavior throughout the school day. Heightened Self-Awareness also helps children relate better to their peers and have more positive interactions with their classmates, cutting down on personal conflict in the classroom (Garner and Estep, 2001; Denham, 2007). This helps children create and maintain friendships while contributing to a harmonious classroom environment.

A realistic understanding of strengths and limitations is an important contributing factor to academic achievement. Children who are confident in their abilities and aware of their areas of difficulty are less likely to be discouraged by individual setbacks and are more likely to persist in the face of failure (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003). While a child lacking in Self-Awareness might lose his desire to apply himself in math class after receiving a poor mark on an algebra test, a self-aware child is able to understand that one poor mark is not a reflection of her overall ability. The self-aware child might then use the experience to think through what she could have done differently, thus increasing her likelihood of receiving a higher grade on the next test. A realistic understanding of strengths and limitations also contributes to academic achievement by reducing the amount of time students spend procrastinating: because they are more confident in their abilities, self-aware students tend to experience less anxiety related to completing assignments and are able to complete these assignments more efficiently (Ferrari, 2001). These students' realistic understanding of their strengths contributes to their *perceived self-efficacy,* or their belief that they possess the skills and abilities necessary to accomplish their goals. Perceived self-efficacy offers the motivation these students need to persist in the face of failure and to continue to apply themselves despite short-term

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discouragement. A belief in their abilities, combined with a consistent desire for self-improvement, is critical to students' long-term academic success.

IN THE FUTURE

The ability to realistically understand one's strengths and limitations and consistently work towards improvement is critical not only in childhood and youth but also throughout adulthood. Self-Awareness-related skills have been shown to predict a variety of long-term outcomes, including those related to educational and career attainment, health, and pro-social behavior.

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 2000) identifies a number of characteristics outside of academic and technical knowledge and skills that are necessary for career readiness and employability. Several of these skills are related to Self-Awareness, including showing awareness of personal learning styles, demonstrating accurate knowledge of skills and abilities, setting well-defined and realistic personal goals for self-improvement, exhibiting awareness of emotional capacity and needs, and understanding how to best fulfil those emotional needs.

Accordingly, self-aware individuals tend to perform better in the workplace. They are likely to be confident in their strengths, understanding of their limitations, and eager to improve in these areas of limitation. Self-aware workers have been found to procrastinate less often than their coworkers who are less skilled in Self-Awareness because they are surer of their abilities and experience less anxiety when faced with a list of tasks to complete (Ferrari, 2001). A lack of Self-Awareness can be detrimental when it causes an underestimation of workplace skills, but it can also be detrimental when it causes overestimation of skills. For some employees, overestimating abilities can have benign outcomes: for example, an accountant might overestimate how quickly she will be able to complete a report for her supervisor and may end up missing a deadline due to her overconfidence. However, for others, the negative outcomes associated with overestimating abilities can be severe. A doctor may feel confident enough in his own abilities to give a patient a clean bill of health, despite the patient's complaints of symptoms which fall outside of his area of expertise. The doctor's decision to treat the patient without soliciting the opinion of a specialist might cause a serious condition to go undiagnosed. The severity of such consequences has even motivated professional organizations to include awareness of expertise in their codes of conduct: for example, the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists" upheld by the American Psychological Association (APA)

requires that practitioners understand their own areas of expertise, specifying that they should, "provide services, teach, and conduct research with populations and in areas only within the boundaries of their competence" (American Psychological Association, 2017). It is important to understand and own one's strengths in the workplace, but it is also vital to understand areas of limitation in order to ensure they do not result in negative outcomes.

Emotional awareness, an important component of Self-Awareness, is also associated with workplace performance. Those who are emotionally aware are better able to collaborate with others, identify and cope with stress, and manage their emotional responses to specific situations. Individuals who display emotional awareness are more likely to become successful workplace leaders (Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005), and are more likely to be identified as effective leaders by their colleagues and employees (Butler, Kwantes, & Boglarsky, 2014). They are also found to have higher levels of job satisfaction (Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006; Wong & Law, 2002). The abilities to identify and manage emotional responses are valuable skills for experiencing success and fulfilment in the workplace.

People who are self-aware are more likely to engage in safe and healthy behaviors and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Those who lack Self-Awareness have been found to underestimate their risk of contracting diseases and of becoming injured, and have also been found to underestimate the negative effects of risk behaviors such as smoking and drinking (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). This leads them to engage in these risky behaviors more often. Additionally, Self-Awareness, specifically emotional awareness, is associated with risk behaviors among college students. The period of late adolescence, or "emerging adulthood," is a highly emotional transitionary period for many teens, rife with new responsibilities and new opportunities (Arnett, 2000). This period sees peak engagement in risky behaviors, such as substance use, risky driving, and unsafe sex (Arnett, 2000). College students who are better able to identify their emotions are better able to cope with them in healthy and productive ways and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (Rivers et al., 2013). This transitionary period is also a key risk period for the development of eating disorders (Eisenberg, Nicklett, Roeder, & Kirz, 2011). A lack of Self-Awareness factors heavily into the development of eating disorders, which are often rooted in an inaccurate perception of oneself. Beyond issues with perception, difficulties in identifying emotions, understanding their root causes, and regulating emotional responses are associated with binge eating and otherwise disordered eating habits (Whiteside et al., 2007). The development of Self-Awareness skills can lead to healthier outcomes for youth, in late adolescence and beyond.

Self-Awareness skills are critical to students' short-term and long-term success across settings, from the home to the classroom to the college campus or workplace. Promoting Self-Awareness can benefit students in a number of ways and can create a solid foundation for the development of other social and emotional skills. Adults can intentionally help students build and develop Self-Awareness skills through simple and straightforward strategies that can be incorporated into everyday interactions. The strategies in this guide are a starting point for developing and supporting children as they acquire and strengthen their Self-Awareness skills, which will benefit them now and into the future.

Self-Awareness Reflection Questions

We encourage you to explore this social-emotional competency in more depth by reflecting on the following questions:

- How do you see this competency providing opportunities for growth in your educational setting?
- What aspects of this competency would you like to learn more about?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges for building this competency in your students?

This guide does not represent a comprehensive literature review, but a foundation for exploring the strategies found in the DESSA Comprehensive SEL System. Please feel free to use the references below to further explore the construct of Self-Awareness.

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