DESSA

Comprehensive SEL System

APERTURE EDUCATION

STRATEGIES GUIDE:

Goal-Directed Behavior

-2020-

Goal-Directed Behavior

A child's initiation of, and persistence in completing, tasks of varying difficulty.

What is Goal-Directed Behavior?

Goal-Directed Behavior refers to a child's initiation of, and persistence in completing, tasks of varying difficulty in order to reach a goal. Children who demonstrate Goal-Directed Behavior may seek out relevant opportunities for learning or meeting their goals, will appear intentional and determined in their actions, and will follow-through even when a task or the circumstances are challenging. For example, consider a child who aims to become a more competitive swimmer. To help attain her goal, the child will seek out the advice of her coach and set incremental goals to reduce her lap times. She will attend all swimming practices and continuously put forth her best effort even when her muscles are sore, and she is tired. This youth is motivated to reach an important personal goal; she shows initiative in taking the necessary steps to reach that goal and continues her effort and perseveres despite the challenges she encounters.

Goal-Directed Behavior may seem to overlap with other social-emotional competencies on the DESSA, such as Self-Management and Optimistic Thinking. For example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) incorporates the construct of Goal-Directed Behavior into Self-Management, which they define as, "The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals (CASEL, 2012, p. 9)." The authors of the DESSA have separated the constructs of Goal-Directed Behavior and Self-Management so that adults can more easily observe and develop these skills in children and youth. In the DESSA and accompanying strategies, Goal-Directed Behavior items reflect the initiation of and persistence in completing tasks of varying difficulty to reach of goal, while the construct of Self-Management emphasizes the ability to control emotions and behaviors in order to complete a task or succeed in new or challenging situations.

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

DESSA K-8	DESSA-HSE
3. keep trying when unsuccessful?	2. keep trying when unsuccessful?
9. take steps to achieve goals?	7. try to do her/his best?
12. try to do her/his best?	8. take an active role in learning?
13. seek out additional knowledge or information?	11. ask to take on additional work or responsibilities?
14. take an active role in learning?	16. seek out more information when wanted or needed?
15. do things independently?	19. work hard on projects or schoolwork?
18. ask to take on additional work or responsibilities?	
26. show creativity in completing a task?	
29. seek out challenging tasks?	
33. work hard on projects?	

While all the items on the Goal-Directed Behavior scale focus on important behaviors related to achieving a goal, items 9, 13, 14, 15, 18, and 29 (DESSA K-8) and items 8, 11, and 16 (DESSA-HSE) specifically indicate an *initiation* of tasks of varying difficulty to reach a goal. Items 3, 12, 26, and 33 (DESSA K-8) and items 2, 7, and 19 (DESSA-HSE) refer to *persistence* in completing tasks of varying difficulty to reach a goal.

The Different Aspects of Goal-Directed Behavior

As you use the Goal-Directed Behavior 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 Goal-Directed Behavior: *initiation of tasks of varying difficulty* and *persistence in completing tasks of varying difficulty* in order to reach a goal. At the heart of each aspect is motivation. Motivation plays a role both in a child's initial desire to pursue a goal and in the continued effort and persistence needed to complete the intermediate steps to ultimately achieve that goal (Bandura, 1993; Pintrich, 2003).

INITIATION OF TASKS OF VARYING DIFFICULTY

An important aspect of Goal-Directed Behavior is the *initiation of tasks of varying difficulty*. Children may be motivated to pursue a goal for a variety of reasons. For example, a child may develop an interest in dinosaurs and then seek out books and resources to learn as much as they can about the topic. Similarly, a youth may ask to take on more responsibilities in their classroom or a

school club in order to gain leadership experience that will benefit them as they enter high school and prepare for college. In both examples, the child has identified a goal to pursue and actively sets out to meet that goal. Children demonstrating Goal-Directed Behavior will be intentional in their behavior by planning the intermediate steps necessary to achieve their goals and monitoring the progress they are making as they work to attain their goals. They will also be actively involved in the process; they will do things independently and take an active role in their learning and attainment of their goal. Additionally, they will seek out opportunities that help them reach their goals. For example, they may take on challenging tasks, seek out additional knowledge or information, or ask to take on additional work or responsibilities.

PERSISTENCE IN COMPLETING TASKS OF VARYING DIFFICULTY

The second aspect of Goal-Directed Behavior is *persistence in completing tasks of varying difficulty*. Once a child has chosen a goal and their course of action, they must exert continued effort and persistence in completing the necessary intermediate tasks in order to achieve that goal. Motivation remains an important influence, as it will help the child continue to work towards the goal despite challenges they may encounter along the way. Children demonstrating Goal-Directed Behavior will keep trying when they are unsuccessful. They may also show creativity in completing a task, particularly when they need to problem-solve through an obstacle or challenge. These children will also continually try to do their best and will tend to work hard each step of the way. This aspect of Goal-Directed Behavior is closely related to Self-Management. As children work towards their goals they will need to remain in control of their emotions and behaviors, particularly when facing challenges, fatigue, or disappointments.

The Development and Importance of Goal-Directed Behavior

The capacity to engage in Goal-Directed Behavior is required across the lifespan. Young children may show this behavior by completing the building of a tower of blocks. Adolescents may demonstrate it by choosing to pursue a satisfying career or a college education. This behavior continues to be important for adults, for example in workplace performance, completing a long-term home construction project, or meeting the goal of running a first 5K. Adults can play an integral role in helping children learn to set meaningful goals, identify realistic intermediate steps, and persist in

the face of difficulty to ultimately reach these goals. Because Goal-Directed Behavior is important in children's personal and academic lives, the DESSA Growth Strategies were written to include activities for developing these skills in school, in out-of-school time programs, and in the home.

DEVELOPING GOAL-DIRECTED BEHAVIOR IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The process of setting goals positively impacts behavior in many ways. Goals serve to initiate action towards a desired outcome. They help to direct attention to goal-relevant tasks and shift attention away from tasks that are irrelevant to the goal (Locke & Latham, 2002; Zimmerman, 2008), which is closely related to the skills described in the DESSA construct of Self-Management. Additionally, goals generally increase effort and persistence; when individuals set personally meaningful goals for themselves, greater effort and persistence tend to follow (Locke & Latham, 2002; Zimmerman, 2008), and individuals are better able to manage disappointment or frustration (Locke & Latham, 2002). Furthermore, the setting of goals leads individuals to use relevant strategies to attain the goal (Locke & Latham, 2002; Smith, Locke, & Barry, 1990). They are likely to draw on existing strategies or develop new strategies to attain their goals. Creativity, flexible thinking, and problem-solving skills are often called upon as individuals plan and work to reach their goals. Finally, as individuals experience successful goal attainment, their self-efficacy, defined as beliefs about your ability to do well on a specific task or domain (Bandura, 1993), has been shown to increase (Pintrich, 2003). This in turn enhances commitment to goals and leads to the use of appropriate strategies to attain goals (Pintrich, 2003). The DESSA construct of Optimistic Thinking, which includes children's accurate beliefs about themselves, is therefore closely aligned with Goal-Directed Behavior. Taken together, the process of setting goals actively engages children in their own learning; it promotes planning and selecting appropriate strategies necessary to meet the demands of the goal, and encourages progress monitoring as children strive to meet that goal (Covington, 2000).

One way in which adults can support the development of Goal-Directed Behavior is by encouraging children and providing opportunities for children to set meaningful short and long-term goals. Meaningful goals are those that have personal value to the individual setting them. Goals that are deemed as important and meaningful are associated with goal commitment, which in turn, influences the continued effort needed to reach goals, particularly when those goals are difficult (Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002; Locke & Latham, 2002; Zimmerman, 2008). To help

children set meaningful goals, it may be useful to reflect on your own experience with setting and attaining personally relevant goals. It may also be beneficial to help cultivate students' own passions, which can help them become intrinsically motivated (Lepper, Henderlong Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005) and lead them to pursue tasks and goals for the enjoyment, interest, or challenge involved. Relatedly, it may also be useful to create an environment that encourages personal or academic learning goals. Learning goals involve increasing competency or understanding about a particular topic or skill, and are associated with high levels of persistence and effort as well as the seeking out of challenging tasks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), which lead to improved performance and achievement (Grant and Dweck, 2003). Providing children time to reflect on and specify their vision for their future self may help children form these goals as well as lead to increased motivation for working towards that goal (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010).

In addition to goals being meaningful, goal-setting theory suggests that goals that are specific and difficult, yet still realistic, elicit better performance (Locke, Chah, Harrison, & Lustgarten, 1989; Locke & Latham, 2002; Zimmerman, 2008). For example, a skill improvement goal such as "I will become a better piano player" may not be as effective as a more specific goal that states "I will attend weekly piano lessons and practice three times a week this summer in order to improve my piano playing." In addition to being specific and challenging (but not unrealistic), this goal is also measurable. It clearly states the actions the student intends to take in order to attain their goal. It also provides a way for the student to check in on their progress throughout the summer. Smaller steps, or sub-goals, such as these support the achievement of a larger goal (Latham & Seijts, 1999; Zimmerman, 2008). These principles are closely aligned with a commonly used goal-setting heuristic called the SMART framework (Day & Tosey, 2011; Doran, 1981). This framework recommends goals to be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable (or **A**chievable), **R**elevant (or **R**ealistic), and **T**ime-sensitive.

In addition to encouraging goal-setting, adults can assist children in meeting their goals by providing formative feedback and encouraging reflection and self-monitoring of their progress towards meeting their goal (Bullock & Wikeley, 2008). This process and resulting information are critical for goal setting to be effective; individuals can only adjust their effort or strategies if they have a sense of how they are progressing toward their goal (Locke & Latham, 2002). When progress is being made, motivation is higher and emotions are more positive (Amabile & Kramer, 2010), which is reinforcing and helps individuals continue to move forward. This process also helps to engage

children in their own learning and is most effective when reflection is an integrated part of goal progress monitoring and when feedback is provided in a timely manner (Zimmerman, 2008).

Ultimately, the development of Goal-Directed Behavior is influenced by the child's environment. Adults can create an environment that teaches children why thoughtful planning for the future is important and set a culture that notices and reinforces children for their effort, persistence, and hard work (Dweck, 2007; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Adults can also provide children with opportunities to succeed on tasks that are within their range of competence, which will foster positive and accurate beliefs in their abilities (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002) and help them throughout the process of initiating and persisting in reaching their goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). There is also value is creating a learning environment that encourages realistic risk-taking and opportunities to learn from mistakes, both of which provide important experiences and information for children to utilize as they work through setting and meeting their goals. Finally, as is the case with the development of all social-emotional competencies, an environment characterized as positive, caring, encouraging, and engaging will help students succeed as they set and achieve their personal and academic goals (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

The Benefits of Goal-Directed Behavior

As children develop and use the skills of Goal-Directed Behavior in their lives, they may experience a variety of positive benefits in the home, in their school or out-of-school time program, and in the future.

IN THE HOME

Children with Goal-Directed Behavior skills are likely to contribute to a calm and organized home environment. To age-appropriate degrees, children with strong Goal-Directed Behavior skills will be self-sufficient and independent, will often ask to take on additional responsibilities at home, and will strive to complete assigned tasks and chores. During the school year, these children will work hard to complete their homework and will take an active role in learning above and beyond what is assigned to them. For example, they may visit the library in the summer to read about a topic of interest. Research has suggested that children who have skills related to Goal-Directed Behavior are likely to spend more time on homework, start their homework earlier in the day, and spend less

time watching television (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). These children are also likely to set a personally meaningful goal and find satisfaction in working towards achieving that goal in their free time at home (e.g., working to become a better piano player). Findings from relevant research on the construct of grit (perseverance and passion for long-term goals) suggests that children demonstrating these Goal-Directed Behavior related skills are likely to persist through activities that may be perceived as tedious but necessary to reach a goal (e.g., practicing piano), and which in turn, help them successfully reach their goal (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, & Ericsson, 2011).

IN THE SCHOOL OR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM

Children who display Goal-Directed Behavior skills are likely to contribute to an organized, engaged, and positive classroom or program environment. When children are actively engaged in their learning, teachers and out-of-school time professionals will be able to spend more time on instruction. A great deal of research related to goal setting by school-aged children involves setting achievement and learning goals, with the aim of acquiring new knowledge or skills. When students set meaningful learning goals, they are more likely to engage in self-regulated learning and planning, including monitoring their progress as they work towards their learning goals and using strategies that promote a deeper processing of the content (Covington, 2000; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Additionally, learning goals are associated with increased persistence and sustained intrinsic motivation as children experience success in progressing toward meeting their goals (Grant & Dweck, 2003), which contributes to an effective learning environment. In the face of setbacks or failures, students who have set realistic learning goals and planned attainable intermediate steps are more likely to make adaptive attributions in which they believe that success is a result of effort while failures indicate that they did not use the appropriate strategies to meet their desired goal (Covington, 2000). Students who have set learning goals are also more likely to take on tasks that are increasingly challenging as they work to master new content or skills (Grant & Dweck, 2003).

These behavioral benefits (i.e., increased effort, persistence, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulated behavior) in turn are positively associated with the achievement of long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) as well as school performance, including improved grades, exam performance, and achievement test scores (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Grant & Dweck, 2003). Additionally, when learning goals are set, students are more likely to experience

positive affect (e.g., satisfaction and pride) as they work towards and eventually attain their goals, and are less likely to demonstrate negative affect when facing setbacks or disappointments (Covington, 2000; Grant & Dweck, 2003).

IN THE FUTURE

The process of setting and achieving goals has been linked to a variety of important outcomes as children transition into adulthood. For individuals enrolled in higher education, effective goal setting has been found to predict successful outcomes. A recent study found that undergraduate students who participated in a single session, intensive, goal-setting program (which involved setting personal goals and planning the steps to achieve those goals) experienced increases in their GPA, were more likely to maintain a full course load, and reported reductions in their negative affect in the following semester compared to a control group (Morisano et al., 2010). Similarly, Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot (2002) found that undergraduate students who set achievement related goals for a specific course at the beginning of college were likely to succeed in that class and show continued interest in the subject throughout their college career. Finally, Grant & Dweck (2003) found that learning goals set by college students in a first-year course predicted deeper processing of course material during studying, higher intrinsic motivation throughout the course, and ultimately better grades in the course.

In addition to their importance in higher education, Goal-Directed Behavior skills continue to be important as individuals move into the workplace. 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. A number of these workplace competencies are related to Goal-Directed Behavior including being a self-starter and thinking creatively; being an active learner and utilizing effective learning strategies; setting well-defined and realistic personal goals; selecting relevant, goal-related activities and allocating time towards them effectively; setting high standards; exerting a high level of effort and perseverance toward goal attainment; working hard; maintaining concentration despite unpleasant tasks; evaluating and monitoring progress; and motivating oneself through goal achievement. Accordingly, individuals demonstrating these competencies are more likely to succeed in the workplace (Baum & Locke, 2004).

The skills of Goal-Directed Behavior have also been found to be beneficial for health promotion and well-being. Research has found that goal setting is a useful strategy to promote dietary and physical activity behavioral change (Nothwehr & Yang, 2007; Shilts, Horowitz, & Townsend, 2004). Additionally, there also appears to be an association between happiness and the seeking out and attaining of new goals in life. Individuals who frequently experience positive moods are more likely to seek out and work towards new goals in their lives, and when these goals are attained, their happiness is reinforced (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). This work highlights the link between the DESSA constructs of Goal-Directed Behavior and Optimistic Thinking.

The promotion of Goal-Directed Behavior appears to benefit children in many areas of their lives now and into the future. Adults can make use of their everyday interactions to build and support children's development of these critical skills. The strategies in this guide are intended to be a starting point for promoting Goal-Directed Behavior in children at home, in school, and in out-of-school time programs, as they develop and practice an effective skill set for setting, monitoring, and achieving their goals.

Goal-Directed Behavior 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 Goal-Directed Behavior.

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