

# The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment—Second Step Edition (DESSA-SSE) Brief User’s Guide

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*Note—Complete information on the development, administration, scoring, and interpretation of the DESSA-SSE can be found in the DESSA-SSE online manual available at [www.secondstep.org](http://www.secondstep.org)*

## ■ Description of the DESSA-SSE

The DESSA-SSE is a 36-item, standardized, norm-referenced behavior rating scale that assesses social–emotional competencies of children in kindergarten through 5th grade. Developed to accompany the elementary *Second Step* program (Committee for Children, 2011), the DESSA-SSE can be completed by parents, teachers, or staff at schools and child-serving agencies, including after-school, social service, and mental health programs. The assessment is entirely strength-based, meaning that the items ask only about positive behaviors (e.g., get along with others) rather than maladaptive ones (e.g., annoy others).

The DESSA is organized into conceptually derived scales that correspond to social–emotional skills taught in the *Second Step* program. For each question, the rater is asked to indicate on a 5-point scale how often the student engaged in each behavior over the past 4 weeks. The scale names and definitions are as follows:

- **Skills for Learning**—the child’s ability to use the skills of listening, focusing attention, self-talk, and assertiveness.
- **Empathy**—the child’s ability to identify and label emotions in himself/herself and others and take on others’ perspectives.
- **Emotion Management**—the child’s ability to cope with strong emotions and express them in socially acceptable ways.
- **Problem Solving**—the child’s ability to effectively handle personal challenges and interpersonal conflicts in prosocial ways.

## ■ Uses of the DESSA-SSE

The DESSA-SSE has been developed to provide a measure of four key social–emotional competencies taught in the *Second Step* program. Specifically, the DESSA-SSE has been designed to:

- Provide a psychometrically sound, strength-based measure of social–emotional competence of children in kindergarten through 5th grade.
- Describe the social–emotional competence of children. This information can be used at the school level as part of a needs assessment for implementing a social–emotional learning program such as *Second Step* or for

tracking levels of social–emotional competence at the school or class level over time.

- Evaluate the impact of the *Second Step* program and similar social–emotional learning programs by rigorously evaluating outcomes at the child, classroom, and school levels.

## ■ Qualifications of DESSA-SSE Users and Raters

### Qualifications of DESSA-SSE Users

*DESSA-SSE users* are those who not only administer the DESSA-SSE but also interpret its scores. The guidelines presented here should be considered a general description, rather than an exhaustive list, of those who may use the DESSA-SSE. In every case, however, the DESSA-SSE user has responsibility for the proper use and interpretation of DESSA-SSE results.

DESSA-SSE users should have training in the proper administration, interpretation, and utilization of the DESSA-SSE. This should include knowledge of the interpretation of standardized scores such as *T*-scores and percentiles, the interpretation of scale content and profiles, and the communication of the results to the child, parents, and professionals. Typically, DESSA-SSE users will include administrators, psychologists, social workers, counselors, teachers, mental health consultants, program directors and evaluators, and pediatricians.

### Qualifications of DESSA-SSE Raters

A *rater* is any person who completes the items on the DESSA-SSE. There are two main qualifications of a rater: first, the rater must have had sufficient exposure to the child over the 4 weeks prior to completing the DESSA-SSE; and second, raters should also be able to read English at the 6th-grade level. (**Note:** Recommendations for using the DESSA-SSE with raters who have difficulty reading English are presented below.) Because the scores are a function of the number of times specific behaviors have been noted, a rater’s insufficient opportunity to observe the child could yield an erroneously low rating. In general, raters should have contact with the child for 2 or more hours a day for at least 3 days per week for a 4-week period.

Raters generally fall into two categories: (a) parents, guardians, and other adult caregivers who live with the child; and (b) teachers, after-school program staff, or other professionals who interact directly with the child on a regular basis. The first group of raters is referred to as “parents” and the second group as “teachers” in the remainder of this user’s guide and the DESSA-SSE record form.

## ■ Restrictions for Use

DESSA-SSE users should follow both the instructions included in this user's guide and commonly accepted guidelines for test use and interpretation, such as the American Psychological Association's (APA, 1999) *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Copyright law does not permit the DESSA-SSE user to photocopy or otherwise duplicate test items or record forms in any form. The completed DESSA-SSE Individual Student Profile may be copied and provided to parents after it has been reviewed with them. Because all DESSA-SSE items, norms, and other materials are copyrighted, no DESSA-SSE materials may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the Devereux Foundation.

## ■ Completing the DESSA-SSE

The DESSA-SSE Record Form is used for the administration and scoring of the rating scale. There is one form, which is used for all children in kindergarten through 5th grade. The same form is used for all raters.

A ballpoint pen works best when completing the DESSA-SSE Record Form. The DESSA-SSE is a multi-part, carbonless form, and the rater should be told to press firmly, so that the information provided on page 1 will transfer to the inside page.

### General Administration Guidelines

The following general guidelines for completing the DESSA-SSE should be reviewed with the rater:

1. The rater should complete the DESSA-SSE during a quiet time when there are few distractions.
2. The rater should base the ratings on direct observations of the child, considering only behaviors that he/she has actually seen. The rater should not consider behaviors that were reported to occur in other classrooms or settings.
3. The rater should consider only those behaviors that have occurred in the past 4 weeks.
4. When completing the DESSA-SSE, the rater should avoid comparing the child being rated to other children. The rating should be based solely on the number of times the child being rated exhibited the behaviors, not how frequently the child exhibits the behavior in comparison to other children in the classroom.
5. The rater should answer every item. An inability to complete the items indicates that the rater does not know the child well, and another rater should be used.

■ **Demographic information**—The top of page 1 provides spaces to record demographic information about the child being rated. Raters should complete all of this information.

■ **Completing the ratings**—Page 1 of the DESSA-SSE Record Form contains the directions to the rater followed by the 36 items that comprise the DESSA-

SSE. The rater responds to each item by placing a checkmark in the appropriate box under the words “Never,” “Rarely,” “Occasionally,” “Frequently,” or “Very Frequently.” Raters should complete every item.

■ **Completing the DESSA-SSE with raters who have limited English proficiency**—If the rater has difficulty reading and completing the DESSA-SSE because of limited English-language proficiency, the DESSA-SSE items may be read to him or her. The person reading the DESSA-SSE to the rater should try not to influence the ratings. The items should be read in an even, calm tone, and explanations of the items or examples should not be given. The person reading the DESSA-SSE should also not provide any feedback or react in any way to the rater's responses.

## ■ Scoring the DESSA-SSE

Once the form is completed, scoring the DESSA-SSE is simple. All of the scoring is done on the DESSA-SSE Record Form. Complete scoring directions are given on page 2 of the Record Form.

Prior to scoring the DESSA-SSE, the user should review the Record Form and make sure that all of the demographic information was provided and that all 36 items were completed.

If any information or items were left blank, the rater should be asked to complete the information.

When the information on the Record Form is complete, the DESSA-SSE user tears off the perforated strip on the right side of the form, breaks the seal on the top and bottom of the form, and opens the form. All of the scoring is performed on the inside pages of the DESSA-SSE Record Form as described on page 2 of the Record Form.

### Treatment of Missing Items

Every effort should be made to have the rater complete each item. If the rater absolutely cannot answer the item, the following guidelines should be used:

1. A maximum of two items may be left blank.
2. The two missing items must be on different scales.
3. The value in the shaded rating box for the missing item(s) should be used as the item's raw score.

### The DESSA-SSE Individual Student Profile

The DESSA-SSE Individual Student Profile serves as both the norms tables for determining the standard scores received by the child as well as a convenient, easy-to-understand, graphical means of communicating the child's scores to the child, parents, or staff. The Individual Student Profile can be downloaded from [www.secondstep.org](http://www.secondstep.org).

Directions for the use and interpretation of this profile are provided on page 2 of the Record Form and in the online DESSA-SSE manual.

## The DESSA-SSE Classroom Profile

The Classroom Profile provides a highly effective means of summarizing the social–emotional skills and needs of a group of children. The Classroom Profile forms are provided at [www.secondstep.org](http://www.secondstep.org).

Directions for the use and interpretation of this tool are provided in the online DESSA-SSE manual.

## ■ Interpretation of the DESSA-SSE

### Types of Scores Given

Three types of scores are provided in the DESSA-SSE:

1. **Raw scores**—The raw score for each DESSA-SSE scale provides little information about the overall level of the child’s performance. Raw scores are used only to obtain the *T*-scores and percentile scores.
2. ***T*-scores**—Each DESSA-SSE *T*-score is a standard score set to have a mean of 50 and standard deviation of 10. *T*-scores should always be used when reporting the DESSA results and when comparing scores earned on the various scales. On the DESSA-SSE, *T*-scores range from 28 to 72.
3. **Percentile scores**—Percentile scores compare the child’s behavior to that of other children who have been rated using the DESSA-SSE. The percentile score indicates the percentage of children in the standardization sample who earned the same or lower raw score. Percentile scores are easy to understand but have some significant limitations and should never be used in statistical calculations. See the online DESSA-SSE manual for a discussion of these limitations. DESSA-SSE percentile scores range from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 99.

### T-Score Range Descriptions for the DESSA-SSE Scales

The DESSA-SSE *T*-scores reflect strengths related to social and emotional competence in children, and therefore, high scale scores are desirable. For clarity and consistency, and to aid in the communication of results, we recommend using the following *T*-score range descriptions when reporting DESSA-SSE results.

The term “need for instruction” should be used to describe DESSA-SSE scale *T*-scores of 28 to 40, inclusive. Scores of 40 or less indicate that the child was rated as showing few behaviors associated with the particular social–emotional strength and therefore needs additional instruction or support in the acquisition of this competency. On each scale, approximately 16% of the children in the standardization sample received scores in the need for instruction range.

Scale scores of 41 to 59, inclusive, should be described as “typical.” Children who receive scores in the typical range will likely benefit from universal strategies designed to promote the social–emotional competence of all children. Approximately 68%

of children in the standardization sample received scores in the typical range.

DESSA-SSE scale *T*-scores of 60 to 72, inclusive, should be described as “strengths.” Approximately 16% of the children in the standardization sample received scale scores in the strength range. Parents, teachers, and staff should continue to support and sustain social–emotional competencies that are rated in the strength range. In addition, children who receive scores in the strength range should be included in universal social–emotional learning programs, as they can act as models and support the development of a positive classroom and peer community through helping other students increase their skills.

The DESSA-SSE user should keep in mind that these are guidelines for the categorization and interpretation of DESSA-SSE scores and should not be rigidly applied or overinterpreted. DESSA-SSE users should always take measurement error into account when interpreting DESSA-SSE scores. This is particularly important when the *T*-score obtained by the child is close to the thresholds presented above.

## ■ Basic Interpretation of the DESSA-SSE

Interpretation of DESSA-SSE results proceeds in a step-wise fashion from the most general indicator of social and emotional competence to the specific scale scores.

### Step 1: The Social–Emotional Composite

Examine the Social–Emotional Composite (SEC) *T*-score and note the corresponding range description (i.e., strength, typical, need for instruction). This is the broadest and the most reliable index of social and emotional well-being. High scores on the SEC are associated with children who are functioning well in academic and other environments. These children tend to have few behavioral concerns and are more likely to be resilient when faced with risk and adversity.

At the classroom, grade, or school level, examine the percentage of children whose SEC *T*-score falls in the three descriptive ranges and compare those figures to the percentages for the standardization sample as provided above. This will provide a general way of comparing the overall social–emotional competence of the specified group of children to those of children nationally.

### Step 2: Examining Scale Scores

Examine the four separate DESSA-SSE scales, and note the *T*-scores and corresponding ranges. Examination of the separate scale *T*-scores as shown on the Individual Student Profile provides useful information about the specific strengths and needs of each child. Examination of the DESSA-SSE Classroom Profile is particularly useful at this step, as the visual depiction of the scale scores can make patterns of strengths and needs of the entire group of children easier to discern.

## ■ Evaluating Changes in Scores Over Time

Changes in a child's *T*-scores over time can be evaluated when a period of at least 4 weeks between the ratings has elapsed, so that the latter rating represents a new sample of behaviors. Whenever possible, the same rater should be used for both the pretest and the posttest rating. It is essential, however, that the same type of rater (parent or teacher) be used at both administrations.

The statistical significance of the difference between pretest and posttest scores can be determined using the method described by Atkinson (1991). This approach involves the comparison of the obtained posttest score with a range of scores that represents the variability expected by both regression to the mean and measurement error based on the pretest score. To obtain the values needed to assess the significance of the pretest–posttest score differences, we calculated the standard error of prediction.

Posttest confidence ranges were calculated for each DESSA-SSE scale and are presented in the online DESSA-SSE manual, Appendix B, Tables 1 (for parents) and 2 (for teachers). To determine if significant change has occurred, the pretest and posttest scores should be compared using the following method:

**Step 1:** Using the appropriate table based on the rater, find the pretest DESSA-SSE *T*-score in the first column labeled “Pretest Obtained Score.”

**Step 2:** Read across the table to the column that corresponds to the DESSA-SSE scale being evaluated.

**Step 3:** If the posttest DESSA-SSE *T*-score falls within the posttest range provided in the table, there has been no significant change in the child's score. If, however, the posttest score falls above the posttest range, we can conclude that the child's score has shown significant improvement. If the posttest score falls below the range provided, then we conclude that the score has shown significant worsening. This approach can be used to gauge the progress shown by each child on each of the four DESSA-SSE scales.

## ■ Program Evaluation With the DESSA-SSE

The evaluation of changes in DESSA-SSE scores is an important way to determine the effectiveness of the strategies that were applied or curriculum lessons that were taught. It is important, however, to consider two issues when comparing differences over time. As recommended by Jacobsen and Truax (1991), treatment outcome or program evaluation should incorporate the dual criteria of statistically reliable change and clinically (or educationally) meaningful change. The first criterion, statistically reliable change, is addressed through the use of the pretest–posttest comparison technique explained in the previous section.

When statistically reliable change has occurred, the second criterion, the meaningfulness of the change, is determined by the examination of the value of the posttest *T*-scores. Meaningful improvement can be further divided into optimal outcomes and favorable outcomes.

An *optimal* outcome is found when a child with a pretest score in the need for instruction or typical range shows (a) reliable change in a positive direction, as determined using Appendix B, Tables 1 and 2, and (b) the posttest *T*-score falls in the strength range. A *favorable* outcome occurs when a child with a pretest *T*-score in the need for instruction or typical range shows (a) reliable improvement but (b) the posttest *T*-score is below 60.

Ultimately, the best possible outcome for a child is that he or she has all of the DESSA-SSE social–emotional competency scales rated in the “strength” range. Conversely, the worst outcome for a child is to have all of the DESSA-SSE scales rated in the “need for instruction” range.

This dual criterion approach to examining the effectiveness of strategies and curricula to help children develop social and emotional competencies is a flexible and powerful tool. This approach enables the DESSA-SSE user to look at the effectiveness of interventions on a scale-by-scale and child-by-child basis. Using this method, we can determine which children benefited from which interventions in which areas. By aggregating findings across children, classrooms, schools, and so on, we can also use this approach for program evaluation purposes.

**For more information on the development and uses of the DESSA-SSE, read the online DESSA-SSE manual available at [www.secondstep.org](http://www.secondstep.org)**

**Or visit [www.centerforresilientchildren.org](http://www.centerforresilientchildren.org)**

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