



# BUILDING CONNECTIONS

A Book Collection

curated by **free spirit**

PUBLISHING®



# Introduction

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*Building Connections* is a PreK–3 literacy-based resource infused with social and emotional learning (SEL). Each *Building Connections* kit includes 12 texts that are meant to be read aloud to students. Students have the opportunity to engage with texts that contain life skills and life lessons, as well as collaborative activities that develop literacy and build upon the life skills and lessons presented in the text. In this way, *Building Connections* brings together two key aspects of education—literacy and SEL—to support students in becoming readers who have the tools they need to live happy, healthy lives.

Every educator, parent, and community member knows the importance and power of literacy. Literacy instruction is a high priority, especially in the primary grades. We must ensure that students learn to read effectively to build the foundation for academic achievement. Advanced literacy skills are important in every other aspect of life as well; they open the doors to learning about any topic, to college or career readiness, and to enjoyment of and curiosity about the world.

SEL involves learning about ourselves and how to function in community with others. Through *Building Connections*, students learn key skills and competencies that they need to live full, healthy, and meaningful lives. Students have multiple opportunities for collaborating with others to practice both SEL and literacy skills and concepts in engaging ways.



## *Building Connections* Contributing Authors

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The texts in *Building Connections* have been carefully curated from the library of Free Spirit Publishing. For nearly 40 years, Free Spirit Publishing has been meeting the social, emotional, and educational needs of children. The authors of their books are experts in the fields of mental health, social and emotional learning and well-being, and education. The following authors have contributed to the *Building Connections* collections.

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# The *Building Connections* Logic Model

The Logic Model below demonstrates how *Building Connections* is designed to develop the whole child, including students' literacy and social and emotional skills. Evidence of this is suggested through its resources and activities, which are linked to positive outcomes for students. The goal of this model is to help visualize how implementing *Building Connections* can support and contribute to achieving school and district goals.

<b>Problem Statement:</b> There is a need for instructional resources that integrate literacy skills with SEL skills.					
<b>Outcome/Goal:</b> To help students develop literacy skills and life skills.					
<b>Theory of Action</b>					
Educators implement research-based <i>Building Connections</i> materials and strategies.	PreK–3 students engage in and utilize <i>Building Connections</i> content and strategies.	PreK–3 students will have increased reading comprehension and SEL skills.	PreK–3 students will be prepared to apply literacy and SEL skills in academic and real-world settings.	Students will become confident readers with well-developed life skills.	
<b>Logic Model</b>					
Assumptions	Resources/Inputs	Activities	Outputs/Metrics	Outcomes	Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools are interested in integrating SEL into language arts instruction.</li> <li>Interactive read-alouds are valuable instructional activities.</li> <li>Students can develop life skills by making connections between texts and themselves.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Materials developed by experts in the field of mental health and education</li> <li>A Teacher's Guide with key research-based teaching ideas and student reproducibles</li> <li>12 high-interest books addressing life skills and emotional well-being</li> <li>12 book activity charts with connections to literacy and SEL competencies</li> <li>Take-home letters to connect activities at school and home</li> <li>Ebooks and audio recordings of each title</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher-led read-alouds</li> <li>After-reading activities tied to each of the SEL competencies (5 per book)</li> <li>One standards-based literacy activity per book</li> <li>Digital resources to support instructional activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student engagement in texts and resources</li> <li>Engagement in collaborative discussion and reflection activities</li> <li>Improvement in literacy and social and emotional development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased awareness and use of SEL competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making</li> <li>Application of SEL and literacy skills learned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of important life skills</li> <li>Increased interest and engagement in social and academic activities within the school setting</li> <li>Prepared for academic success in secondary and post-secondary grades</li> <li>Prepared for career success with twenty-first-century skills</li> </ul>

# Why Read Aloud to Students Using *Building Connections*?

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Being read to is a joy for children and adults alike, and it provides a variety of benefits. As students listen, they hear models of fluent and prosodic reading. The teacher models the intonation and rhythm of language. As students listen, they can devote their attention to the message, story, or information in the book.



## Research to Practice

*Building Connections* uses the power of reading aloud to teach students literacy and SEL skills. Reading aloud to students has been cited as the most important activity for building reading success in students (Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp 2000).



As students listen to text being read aloud, they gain an understanding and appreciation of how text is written. Students gain familiarity with the structures of nonfiction text and learn conventions of narrative text such as *once upon a time* (Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp 2000). Students learn the connection between printed text and communication—how text can convey meaning through stories or explanation, can share emotion and experience, and can build a conversation between the author and the listener.

Students in prekindergarten through third grade are learning to read; later in their school career, they will read to learn. Reading aloud provides the opportunity for students to access more complex text than they could read on their own. This access enhances the reading skills they are taught throughout the day. Students hear and learn key vocabulary that they might not be able to decode or understand on their own, and are thereby learning more complex ideas and concepts.

Reading aloud demonstrates the rewards of reading, building interest in books and the motivation to learn to be a reader (Mooney 1990). The texts included in *Building Connections* are designed to be read aloud to students, presenting interesting and inspiring stories and topics to engage students in literacy.

Reading aloud also teaches active listening skills, a key set of skills for the twenty-first century. As our society moves toward the ever-faster sharing of information in small chunks, the ability to focus on slower information delivery is diminishing. Through active listening to the texts in *Building Connections* and through the discussion and collaboration included in the instruction, students develop skills in reflection and contemplation, and gain knowledge.

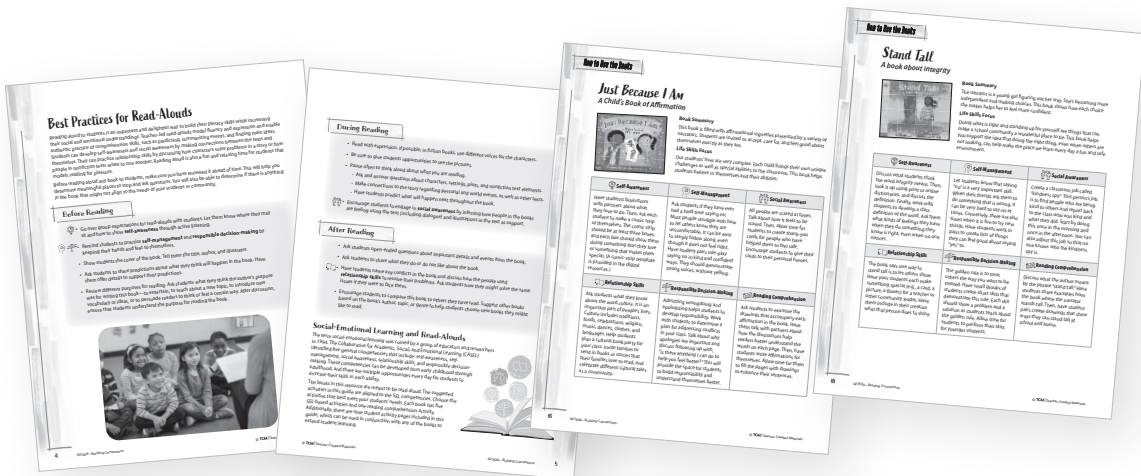
As students hear stories told from varying points of view, they gain broader perspectives. The texts in *Building Connections* serve as both mirrors and windows. Mirrors allow students to see themselves within the text. They may see their own cultural values and experiences in the characters. They may also learn more about a nonfiction topic with which they are already familiar. Windows give students a view of something unfamiliar or provide a new perspective on something familiar. Windows expose students to new ideas and ways of thinking.

Reading aloud gives the teacher the opportunity to stop at strategic points in a book to engage students in conversation and collaborative learning. This in turn builds student comprehension skills. In *Building Connections*, students focus on how the characters in a story or people in a nonfiction text demonstrate or utilize the SEL core competencies. As students discuss key points in the text and engage in collaborative activities, they are developing literacy while also building key SEL skills.



## Research to Practice

*Building Connections* provides multiple ideas for focusing students before, during, and after a read-aloud. These ideas help students build comprehension during the read-aloud in addition to learning about the SEL competencies of focus in the book. Each book has six activities—a reading comprehension activity and one activity for each of the five SEL core competencies. Student activity pages are also included to engage students in the learning process.



# What Is SEL?

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What do students need to be successful in society today? Students certainly need academic skills, including deep reading and writing skills, mathematical practices and problem-solving, and knowledge of the content areas and of the world. They also need life skills, such as collaboration, critical thinking, effective communication, self-management, and empathy, to be productive members of society. The combination of academic skills and life skills is critical for engaging in a complex world in the twenty-first century.

SEL is designed to teach students these essential life skills—skills they need to lead happy, healthy, productive lives. The term *SEL* was coined by researchers and educators in the mid-1990s. SEL has increased steadily in popularity as educators, researchers, parents, and society recognize the value of integrating life skills into instruction. SEL involves learning about ourselves and how to function in community with others. As educators, we have the ability and responsibility to teach students these essential skills.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a community of researchers, educators, and practitioners, has been studying the impact of SEL and advocating for its integration into instruction for more than 25 years. CASEL has identified five core competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Each of these competencies encompasses many skills and concepts that support well-being and mental health.

*Building Connections* shows how to teach each of these competencies through literacy instruction based on a read-aloud text infused with SEL concepts and accompanied by literacy and SEL activities. Each activity integrates a variety of skills and concepts, depending on the book being read, the concepts presented in it, and the grade level of the students.



## The Five Core SEL Competencies



### Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to recognize our own emotions, interests, strengths, and areas of growth. When we are self-aware, we understand the range of emotions we feel, how those emotions arise, and how those emotions impact our behavior. Self-awareness also entails deeply understanding our own interests, core values, and beliefs.



### Self-Management

Self-management is the ability to handle daily stresses and control emotions during difficult situations. When people are able to self-manage, they set plans, work toward goals, overcome obstacles, and monitor progress. Self-management also includes regulating emotions, such as impulses and aggression, managing personal and interpersonal stress, and controlling attention. Students who display self-management also show perseverance and determination, and they seek help when they need it.



### Social Awareness

Social awareness is the ability to recognize and identify the emotions of others. People with social awareness respect others and can predict and evaluate others' emotions and reactions. Social awareness also entails taking others' perspectives into account and empathizing with others.



### Relationship Skills

Relationship skills are the abilities to develop, foster, and maintain healthy relationships, to resist negative social pressures, and to resolve interpersonal conflict. Indicators of relationship skills include demonstrating the capacity to make friends and engage in cooperative learning and collaboration, respecting diverse viewpoints, communicating effectively, providing help to others, and demonstrating leadership opportunities.



### Responsible Decision-Making

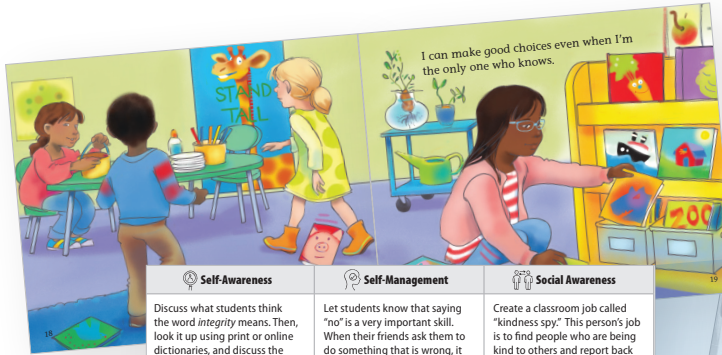
Responsible decision-making is the ability to exhibit ethics, respect, and safety when making decisions. People with this ability identify problems and develop appropriate solutions that benefit themselves as well as society. Responsible decision-makers resist peer pressure, reflect on how their choices affect the future, and evaluate the decision-making process itself.



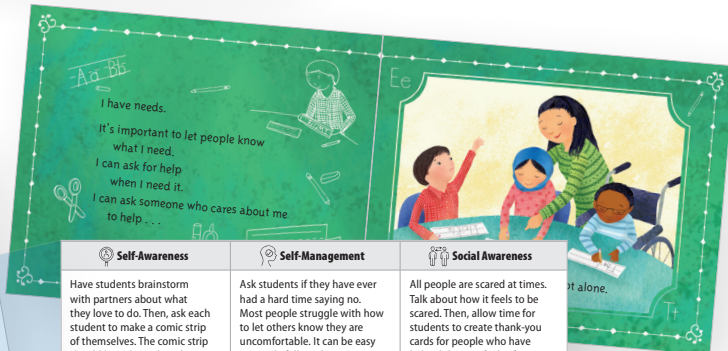
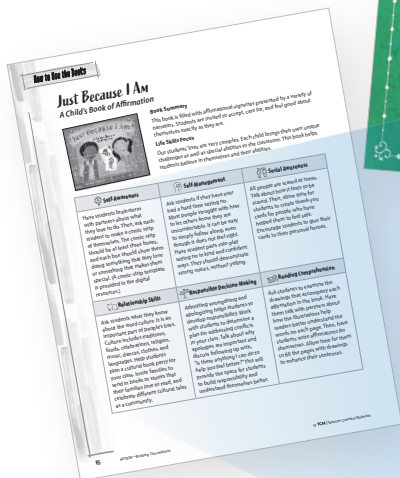
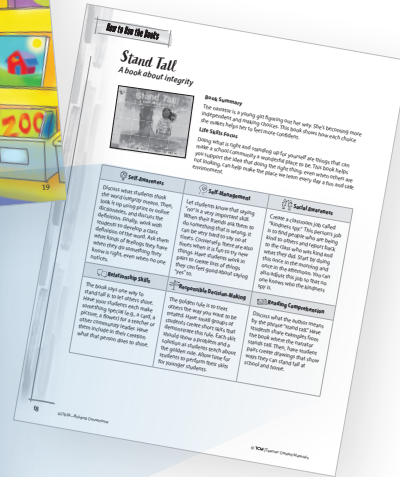


# Research to Practice

*Building Connections* offers activities and tasks for students to practice each of these core competencies after a read-aloud of a text. The competencies are woven into each lesson, providing students the opportunity to work collaboratively to both deepen comprehension and literacy knowledge and skills while also developing SEL skills.



Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness
Discuss what students think the word <i>integrity</i> means. Then, look it up using print or online dictionaries, and discuss the definition. Finally, work with students to develop a class definition of the word. Ask them what kinds of feelings they have when they do something they know is right, even when no one notices.	Let students know that saying "no" is a very important skill. When their friends ask them to do something that is wrong, it can be very hard to say no at times. Conversely, there are also times when it is fun to try new things. Have students work in pairs to create lists of things they can feel good about saying "yes" to.	Create a classroom job called "kindness spy." This person's job is to find people who are being kind to others and report back to the class who was kind and what they did. Start by doing this once in the morning and once in the afternoon. You can also adjust this job so that no one knows who the kindness spy is.
<b>Relationship Skills</b> The book says one way to stand tall is to let others shine. Have your students each make something special (e.g., a card, a picture, a flower) for a teacher or other community leader. Have them include in their creation what that person does to shine.	<b>Responsible Decision-Making</b> The golden rule is to treat others the way you want to be treated. Have small groups of students create short skits that demonstrate this rule. Each skit should show a problem and a solution as students teach about the golden rule. Allow time for students to perform their skits for younger students.	<b>Reading Comprehension</b> Discuss what the author means by the phrase "stand tall." Have students share examples from the book where the narrator stands tall. Then, have student pairs create drawings that show ways they can stand tall at school and home.



Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness
Have students brainstorm with partners about what they love to do. Then, ask each student to make a comic strip of themselves. The comic strip should be at least three boxes, and each box should show them doing something that they love or something that makes them special. (A comic-strip template is provided in the digital resources.)	Ask students if they have ever had a hard time saying no. Most people struggle with how to let others know they are uncomfortable. It can be easy to simply follow along, even though it does not feel right. Have student pairs role-play saying no in kind and confident ways. They should demonstrate strong voices, without yelling.	All people are scared at times. Talk about how it feels to be scared. Then, allow time for students to create thank-you cards for people who have helped them to feel safe. Encourage students to give their cards to their personal heroes.
<b>Relationship Skills</b> Ask students what they know about the word <i>culture</i> . It is an important part of people's lives. Culture includes traditions, foods, celebrations, religion, music, dances, clothes, and languages. Help students plan a cultural book party for your class. Invite families to send in books or stories that their families love to read, and celebrate different cultural tales as a community.	<b>Responsible Decision-Making</b> Admitting wrongdoing and apologizing helps students to develop responsibility. Work with students to determine a plan for addressing conflicts in your class. Talk about why apologies are important and discuss following up with, "Is there anything I can do to help you feel better?" This will provide the space for students to build responsibility and understand themselves better.	<b>Reading Comprehension</b> Ask students to examine the drawings that accompany each affirmation in the book. Have them talk with partners about how the illustrations help readers better understand the words on each page. Then, have students write affirmations for themselves. Allow time for them to fill the pages with drawings to enhance their sentences.

# Why SEL, and Why Now?

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## Challenges Facing Students and Teachers

Over the past several years, we have seen an increase in stress, anxiety, and depression across our society (Mental Health America 2022). The increase has accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and teachers in the classroom today are noting the impact the pandemic has had on students. For many students, isolation and a lack of meaningful interaction during remote or virtual learning have led to a lack of social skills in the classroom. Some students are finding it challenging to collaborate, have civil discourse, or even interact effectively with others. Some students lack motivation.

Some people feel that these issues should be dealt with at home, and that school should focus on teaching students academic content. But families are facing great pressure today, with many parents working long hours just to make ends meet, and some struggling with issues such as depression, debilitating anxiety, and overwhelming stress. Families may not have the research knowledge or teaching skills to impart these skills to their children—especially when they themselves are struggling.



## Research to Practice

Data released by the Illinois State Board of Education showed that approximately 75 percent of students entering kindergarten did not have the skills necessary to be successful, including literacy, mathematics, and social and emotional skills (Burke 2018). By incorporating *Building Connections* into their classroom instruction, educators can help students build both literacy and social and emotional skills.



A report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) noted that the number one cause of death in people aged 1 to 44 was unintentional injury (2020). Some of these injuries result from decisions people make. Terzian, Andrews, and Moore (2011) share that “risky behaviors can be associated with serious, long-term, and—in some cases—life-threatening consequences. This is especially the case when young people engage in more than one harmful behavior.” Not addressing these behaviors can lead to continued risky and even destructive behaviors later in life.

Using *Building Connections* to integrate SEL into literacy instruction can mitigate the impacts of risky behaviors. All students, and especially children who demonstrate behaviors that are maladaptive and harmful to their well-being and that of others, benefit from learning self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The CDC reports that children and adolescents are facing mental health problems in increasing numbers. Approximately 1 in 5 children have a mental illness that will adversely impact their lives, and fewer than 1 in 5 of those children receive appropriate treatment (2022). This includes as many as 1 in 33 children affected by depression, and as many as 1 in 8 adolescents (Baker n.d.). The COVID-19 pandemic has likely increased these numbers.



## Research to Practice

SEL competencies can not only diminish but also eventually eliminate risky and maladaptive behaviors in children and youth (Larrier and Lewis 2017). *Building Connections* incorporates instruction in all five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.



# Research Supporting Integration of SEL in the Classroom

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Multiple studies over the years have shown the positive impact of integrating SEL into instruction. This positive impact is consistent across grade levels, demographics, and geographical regions, including rural and urban areas. A meta-analysis showed an 11-percentile-point increase in academic achievement on standardized tests, along with increased social and emotional skills among students—including improved social attitudes and behaviors, increased positive classroom behavior, and decreased conduct problems and emotional distress in the classroom (Durlak et al. 2011). This analysis included 213 studies involving 270,000 students.



A longitudinal study in 2017 involved more than 97,000 students in kindergarten through middle school, studying the effects of SEL from 6 months to 18 years after SEL programs were instituted. The results showed increases in academic performance, positive attitudes and behavior, and social and emotional skills. There were also decreases in behavior issues, emotional distress, and drug use (Taylor et al. 2017).

Another study found that students with strong SEL skills in kindergarten were more likely to graduate from high school, earn a college degree, and have stable employment in young adulthood. In addition, the students involved in the study were less likely to live in public housing, receive public assistance, be involved with police, or be in a detention facility. This study controlled for demographics such as socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity (Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley 2015).

*Building Connections* was built from this research base. It provides opportunities for students to build literacy skills through authentic, engaging lessons that also teach students the SEL skills they need to be successful in the classroom and beyond.

## Supporting Content Standards with SEL

Educators have an academic, moral, and ethical imperative to support students in becoming happy and healthy individuals who have the skills they need to succeed. In addition to content knowledge and skills, and academic language skills, students need social and emotional skills such as perseverance, resilience, determination, persistence, and focus. Other social and emotional skills, such as empathy and gratitude, are also important to students' well-being and success.

All these skills are necessary for success with today's rigorous standards. Consider the following academic standards and note how SEL is implicitly or explicitly required to reach mastery of the standard:

**ELA/literacy standard:** Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

**Corresponding SEL skills:** Label and recognize own and others' emotions; analyze emotions and how they affect others; evaluate others' emotional reactions; reflect on how current choices affect future.

**ELA/literacy standard:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**Corresponding SEL skills:** Exhibit cooperative learning and working toward group goals; communicate effectively; cultivate relationships with those who can be resources when help is needed; provide help to those who need it; demonstrate leadership skills when necessary, being assertive and persuasive; prevent interpersonal conflict, but manage and resolve it when it does occur.

**Mathematical practice standard:** Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.

**Corresponding SEL skills:** Goal setting and time management; perseverance; critical thinking; self-management.

**Mathematical practice standard:** Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.

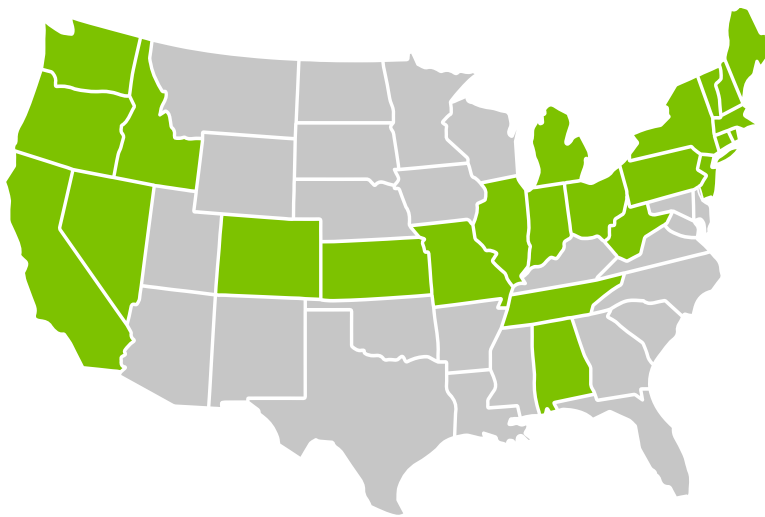
**Corresponding SEL skills:** Self-awareness; social awareness; relationship skills; communication.

While SEL standards are not yet available in every state, many states have developed specific standards that delineate the specific SEL skills that should be taught and learned at various grade levels.

## State SEL Standards

Some form of SEL standards are available to teachers or are under development in the following states:

- |               |                 |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| → Alabama     | → Massachusetts | → Pennsylvania  |
| → California  | → Michigan      | → Rhode Island  |
| → Colorado    | → Missouri      | → Tennessee     |
| → Connecticut | → Nevada        | → Vermont       |
| → Idaho       | → New Hampshire | → Washington    |
| → Illinois    | → New Jersey    | → West Virginia |
| → Indiana     | → New York      | → Wisconsin     |
| → Kansas      | → Ohio          |                 |
| → Maine       | → Oregon        |                 |



In states without explicit SEL standards, using *Building Connections* can assure educators that they are teaching their students the skills they need to be successful academically and throughout life.



## Research to Practice

All *Building Connections* resources correlate to state SEL standards and the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (where applicable).

## Creating a Positive Learning Environment with *Building Connections*

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Creating a classroom learning environment that supports each student in their journey of academic growth and achievement is a critical and ongoing process. Teachers know that building strong and trusting relationships with students and families, along with developing powerful instruction that incorporates literacy and the five SEL competencies and related skills, leads to higher levels of academic achievement.

The classroom environment is at the heart of teaching literacy and SEL. Learning to read is challenging! Students and teachers need to demonstrate respect for one another, build rapport, and establish a strong culture for learning, all while managing emotions and learning to persevere and solve problems. Student behavior can be managed through helping students develop appropriate SEL skills such as self-awareness and self-management, and the classroom environment can be configured through student input and in ways that facilitate SEL instruction and learning.

As teachers get to know their students and learn about students' social and emotional strengths and areas of need, they will be able to more easily plan for meaningful instruction. Using *Building Connections* helps teachers present literacy lessons that integrate the SEL competencies student may need to practice.



# Building Literacy through Collaboration

When adults read aloud to students, they build community and level the playing field. Each student has access to the text as it is read aloud. This in turn allows students to focus on the content, especially as they engage in the collaborative activities built into *Building Connections*. Each lesson includes six potential activities: a reading comprehension activity and one activity for each of the five core SEL competencies. Each activity provides an opportunity for students to collaborate in pairs or small groups. Teachers should choose the activities that best meet the needs of the students in their class.



## Research to Practice

The materials, lessons, and activities in *Building Connections* build literacy skills by helping educators teach students communication skills as well as appropriate questioning and discussion techniques. Students learn specific skills such as retelling, asking and answering questions about the text, comparing and contrasting, stating and supporting opinions, and more. As students develop deeper comprehension skills, they are better able to engage in learning. Assessing these comprehension skills and correlating them to learning academic content will help teachers determine student growth and respond appropriately to student needs.

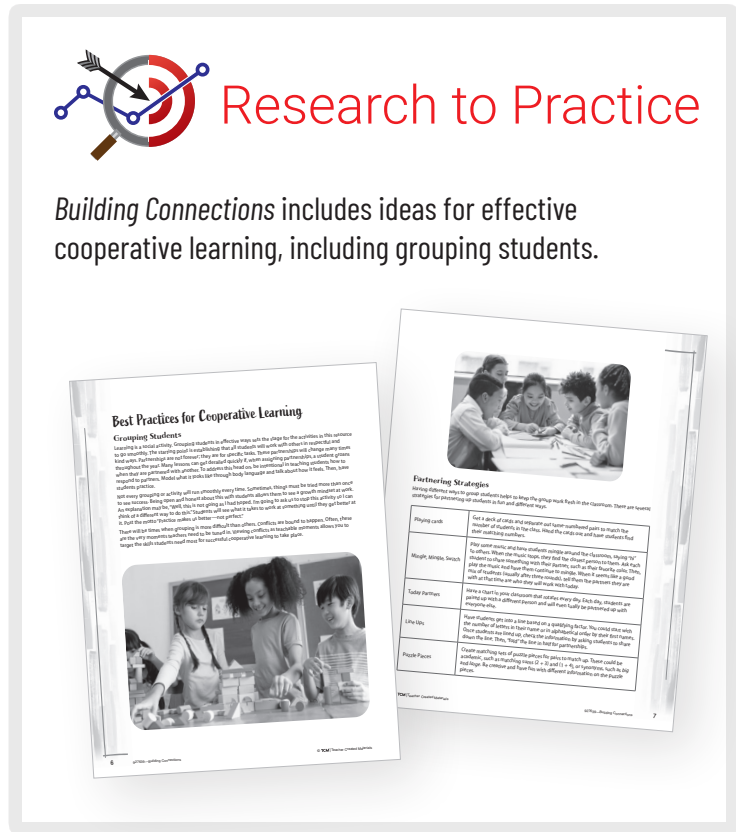




## Collaboration and SEL

All learning is a social endeavor. *Building Connections* provides opportunities for students to engage in cooperative learning through the activities presented with each book. Effective collaboration must be taught to students. Any teacher who has tried putting students into groups to work together without first setting up guidelines knows that group work can be a slippery slope, with some students thriving and others not participating effectively.

Collaboration entails more than just working together. Students today, in order to be successful, must demonstrate flexibility and compromise as they work to achieve a common goal. They must share accountability while celebrating individual goals and accomplishments, and they must plan, practice, implement, evaluate, and revise actions or strategies. As students work together collaboratively, they build and deepen relationships. They learn the skills they need to work with others, including self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. They learn to make good decisions as they work together.



**Research to Practice**

*Building Connections* includes ideas for effective cooperative learning, including grouping students.

**Best Practices for Cooperative Learning**

**Grouping Students**

Leaving a group of students to work together without first setting up guidelines is like leaving a group of students to work together without first setting up guidelines. It is a slippery slope, with some students thriving and others not participating effectively. To ensure the best possible outcomes for all students, it is important to establish clear guidelines for cooperative learning from the beginning. This includes setting up guidelines for participation, accountability, and conflict resolution. It is also important to provide ongoing support and feedback to students as they work together. This can be done through regular check-ins, observations, and reflections. By following these best practices, teachers can create a supportive and effective learning environment for all students.

**Factoring Strategies**

Get a stack of index cards and have students write down the number of factors of each number from 1 to 100. Then, have students sort the cards into groups based on the number of factors. This activity helps students understand the relationship between the number of factors and the number of divisors of a number. It also helps students develop their factoring skills and understand the concept of prime numbers.

Playing cards	Get a stack of index cards and have students write down the number of factors of each number from 1 to 100. Then, have students sort the cards into groups based on the number of factors.
Weight, volume, length	Play cards and have students compare and contrast the number of factors of each number. This activity helps students understand the relationship between the number of factors and the number of divisors of a number. It also helps students develop their factoring skills and understand the concept of prime numbers.
Ticker-tape	Have a chart to plot the number of factors of each number. This activity helps students understand the relationship between the number of factors and the number of divisors of a number. It also helps students develop their factoring skills and understand the concept of prime numbers.
Life size	Have students write down the number of factors of each number on a large sheet of paper. This activity helps students understand the relationship between the number of factors and the number of divisors of a number. It also helps students develop their factoring skills and understand the concept of prime numbers.
People Pairs	Divide students into pairs and have them work together to find the number of factors of each number. This activity helps students understand the relationship between the number of factors and the number of divisors of a number. It also helps students develop their factoring skills and understand the concept of prime numbers.

## Conclusion

The skills that students learn in *Building Connections* should be emphasized throughout the day and throughout the school year. In this way, the texts serve as a launching point for student learning. The texts and activities build a foundation upon which strong literacy skills and deep internalization of the core SEL competencies can be built. As students build reading comprehension skills, learn about the SEL competencies and skills presented in *Building Connections*, and apply them in the classroom and in their world, they develop the skills they need to be successful, healthy, and happy individuals throughout their lives.

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