

SE

40 Free 5-Minute SEL Exercises

CASEL-aligned micro-practices for K-12 classrooms, staff rooms,
and kitchen tables. No prep. No materials. Five minutes each.

8 exercises per CASEL competency:
Self-Awareness · Self-Management · Social Awareness ·
Relationship Skills · Responsible Decision-Making

A free resource from
SEL Academy — selacademyschools.com

Self-Awareness

Recognizing emotions, strengths, and how thoughts influence behavior.

1 Emotion Weather Report

GRADES K-12 • 5 MINUTES

Students describe their inner state as weather — sunny, foggy, stormy — and learn that all weather passes.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Everyone closes their eyes for ten seconds and simply notices their inner state — no fixing, just noticing.
2. A few volunteers (or the whole class, popcorn style) finish the sentence: “Today my weather is ____ because ____.”
3. Teacher goes first to model it. Younger students can draw their weather instead of saying it.
4. Close with one line: “Weather changes. So do we.”

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What does knowing your weather help you do today?

Facilitator tip: Skip the “because” for the youngest learners — naming alone is the win.

2 Sixty-Second Body Scan

GRADES 2-12 • 5 MINUTES

A head-to-toe noticing sweep that shows students where stress actually lives in the body.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Sit tall, eyes low or closed. The teacher slowly calls out zones: jaw, shoulders, belly, hands, feet.
2. At each zone, students notice — tight or loose, warm or cool, tingling or still. Nothing to change.
3. End with one word out loud (or in mind): “tight,” “loose,” “warm.”
4. Optional second round: pick the tightest zone and let one long exhale soften it.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Where does your body hold stress, and how did you know?

Facilitator tip: Keep the voice slow and boring on purpose — calm is contagious.

3 Strength Spotting

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

Students hunt for one strength they actually used in the last 24 hours — proof they already have tools.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Define strength simply: “something you’re good at that helps people — including you.”
2. Thirty seconds of silent thinking: name one strength you used in the last day.
3. Pair share: “A strength I used was ____ when ____.”
4. Two or three volunteers share out; class claps once for each.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

How did using that strength change how your day went?

Facilitator tip: If a student can't find one, ask what their best friend would say they're good at.

4 The Mirror Minute

GRADES K-5 • 5 MINUTES

Partners make faces, name feelings, and build the habit of reading emotional clues.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Partner A makes a face showing a feeling — no talking.
2. Partner B names the feeling and guesses one moment it might show up (“you look proud — like when you finished something hard”).
3. Swap roles.
4. Whole-class round: teacher flashes a face, kids race to name it and the clue that gave it away.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What clues — eyes, mouth, posture — told you the feeling?

Facilitator tip: Ban silly-only faces after round one; the goal is real feelings, not comedy.

5 Trigger Detective

GRADES 4-12 • 5 MINUTES

Students trace one mood shift from today back to its spark — the moment before the feeling.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Define trigger: “a spark that sets off a feeling — not an excuse, a clue.”
2. Students recall one moment today when their mood shifted, and jot what happened right before it.
3. Add one sentence: “The spark felt like ____ in my body.”
4. No sharing required — this one is private by design.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Why does spotting the spark before the fire matter?

Facilitator tip: Never force sharing on this exercise. Privacy is what makes it honest.

6 Feelings Ladder

GRADES 2-12 • 5 MINUTES

Upgrade vague feeling words into precise ones — because “mad” and “furious” need different responses.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Write “mad” on the board. Class ranks its ladder: annoyed → frustrated → angry → furious.
2. Build a second ladder for “good”: fine → content → happy → thrilled.
3. Challenge: everyone replaces “I feel bad” with one precise word from their own ladder.
4. Share precise words aloud; steal any word you want from someone else’s ladder.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

How does the precise word change what you do next?

Facilitator tip: A class feelings-word wall grows naturally out of this — keep adding all year.

7 Speed Values Sort

GRADES 5-12 • 5 MINUTES

A rapid-fire top-three values ranking that gives students a personal compass in under five minutes.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Teacher reads ten values aloud, twice: honesty, winning, loyalty, fairness, safety, fun, respect, money, kindness, freedom.
2. Students silently write their top three.
3. Stand by your #1: assign each value a corner of the room and let students physically choose.
4. One sentence in your corner: “It made my top three because ____.”

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Where did your top value actually show up this week?

Facilitator tip: Let students switch corners mid-activity — changing your mind is allowed.

8 Inner Voice Check

GRADES 4-12 • 5 MINUTES

Students catch the exact sentence their inner voice said after their last mistake — then rewrite it as a coach.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Recall your most recent mistake. No need to share what it was.
2. Write the exact sentence your inner voice said right after it.
3. Label the sentence “coach” or “critic.”
4. If it’s a critic, rewrite it as a coach would say it. Keep the rewrite.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Whose voice does your inner critic sound like?

Facilitator tip: This one pairs powerfully with the Resilience Reflection Journal.

Self-Management

Regulating emotions, setting goals, and managing stress effectively.

9 Box Breathing

GRADES K-12 · 5 MINUTES

The four-square breath — inhale, hold, exhale, hold — traced in the air with a finger.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Trace a square in the air with your index finger: up the side for 4 (inhale), across the top for 4 (hold), down for 4 (exhale), across for 4 (hold).
2. Repeat four rounds — about 64 seconds.
3. Afterward, notice one body change: pulse, temperature, shoulders.
4. Older students: drop to silent tracing and close the eyes.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

When is the smartest time to use this on purpose — before a test, a game, a hard talk?

Facilitator tip: Works before assemblies, tests, and any moment a room needs to settle.

10 Five-Finger Breathing

GRADES K-5 · 5 MINUTES

Trace the hand, breathe the fingers — five breaths that a five-year-old can run without an adult.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Spread one hand wide like a star.
2. With the other index finger, trace up each finger slowly (inhale) and down (exhale).
3. Five fingers = five full breaths. Go twice through.
4. Finish by asking: which finger had your longest, slowest breath?

DEBRIEF QUESTION

How do your hands and breath feel different after ten breaths?

Facilitator tip: Teach it once in September; students use it solo all year.

11 The Reset Button

GRADES 2-12 • 5 MINUTES

A three-move physical reset — shrug, exhale, sit tall — for the gap between classes or activities.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Stand. Shrug shoulders up to the ears, hold two seconds, drop. Repeat twice.
2. One big exhale — like fogging a window in slow motion.
3. Sit tall and choose one intention word for the next block (“focus,” “calm,” “finish”).
4. Say the word silently once. Done.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What actually changed in sixty seconds?

Facilitator tip: Anchor it to a transition — after lunch, before a test — so the habit sticks.

12 Ninety-Second Brain Dump

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

Empty every loop running in your head onto paper, then keep only the one thing you control.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Ninety seconds: write everything swirling in your head — homework, drama, errands, worries. No editing, no order.
2. Circle the ONE item you actually control today.
3. Fold the paper. The rest waits on the page; it doesn’t get to live in your head.
4. Schedule the circled item for a specific time.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What happened to the items you don’t control once they were on paper?

Facilitator tip: Great as a Monday-morning opener or pre-test ritual.

13 Stoplight Decisions

GRADES 2-12 • 5 MINUTES

Run a real decision through red (options), yellow (consequences), green (choice) in three minutes flat.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Name a choice you’re actually facing — academic, social, anything real.
2. RED: list your 2-3 options, fast.
3. YELLOW: one likely consequence for each option.
4. GREEN: choose one and say (or write) why in a single sentence.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Which light do you usually skip in real life?

Facilitator tip: Most people skip yellow. Say that out loud — it lands.

14 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

GRADES K-12 • 5 MINUTES

The senses countdown that brings a spinning mind back into the room.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Silently name five things you can see.
2. Four things you can hear.
3. Three things you can touch.
4. Two things you can smell, one thing you can taste — then one slow breath to finish.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Why does noticing the outside help the inside?

Facilitator tip: Whisper it, don't say it — the quiet is part of the effect.

15 Micro-Step Mapper

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

Take a goal you keep postponing and shrink it until it's five minutes long.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Write one goal you've been postponing.
2. Ask the only question that matters: "What's the 5-minute version of this?"
3. Schedule that micro-step for a specific time today — not "later."
4. Tell your elbow partner when it's happening. Said out loud, it's real.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Why does tiny beat big when you're starting?

Facilitator tip: "Write one sentence of the essay" counts. So does "put on shoes."

16 Energy Gauge

GRADES K-12 • 5 MINUTES

Rate your energy 1-10, then match the task to the gauge instead of fighting it.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Everyone rates their energy right now, 1-10, fingers on chest so it's private.
2. Teacher calls out tasks: silent reading, group work, art, math, recess.
3. Students stand if their current energy FITS that task.
4. Discuss the pattern: high energy belongs to movement tasks, low energy to quiet ones.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

How could you shift your gauge on purpose — and when would you want to?

Facilitator tip: This gives students a language teachers use all day: "Check your gauge before we start."

Social Awareness

Empathy, perspective-taking, and understanding diverse backgrounds.

17 Two-Lens Story

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

Retell a real friction from this week — as the other person, in first person. No solving allowed.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Think of a small friction from this week (nothing heavy — a line cut, a snub, a group project snag).
2. Retell it aloud or in writing as the OTHER person: “I felt ____ when ____.” First person, their side.
3. Solving is banned. The listener’s only job is to repeat back the feeling words they heard.
4. Swap roles.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What did the other lens see that yours missed?

Facilitator tip: The ban on solving is the whole exercise. Enforce it warmly.

18 Face Detectives

GRADES K-6 • 5 MINUTES

Read faces like evidence: name the feeling, then name the clue that gave it away.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Teacher displays three photos of faces (or makes three expressions).
2. Students name the feeling AND the clue: “surprised — the eyebrows went up.”
3. Level up: same face, two possible feelings. What context changes the read?
4. Optional closer: what does YOUR face do when you’re concentrating?

DEBRIEF QUESTION

When might a smile hide something?

Facilitator tip: End with: faces are evidence, not proof. Check before you assume.

19 New Kid Lens

GRADES 2-8 • 5 MINUTES

Walk a brand-new student's first day in your mind — and find the moment that would be hardest.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Close eyes. It's your first day at this school and you know nobody.
2. Teacher narrates slowly: walking through the gate, finding your classroom, sitting down, lunch with no table to join.
3. Open eyes: name the single hardest moment.
4. One concrete thing you could do about that moment — for a real new kid, this year.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What does belonging feel like when you have it — and when you don't?

Facilitator tip: Keep one class commitment on the wall: what we do when someone new arrives.

20 Perspective Circle

GRADES 4-12 • 5 MINUTES

One neutral event, three viewpoints argued in thirty seconds each — then find what all three agree on.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Teacher gives a neutral event: "A classmate took your seat."
2. Groups of three: each person argues a different viewpoint — the taker, the taken-from, a bystander.
3. Thirty seconds per viewpoint, rotating.
4. The group's final job: one sentence ALL three viewpoints agree with.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What's the cost of only ever hearing one lens?

Facilitator tip: The agreement sentence is the gold — don't skip it to save time.

21 Tradition Trade

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

Share one family or community tradition — and one way it shaped how you treat people.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Think of one tradition — a food, a phrase, a ritual, a holiday.
2. Pair share: what it is + one way it shaped how you treat people.
3. A few volunteers share one that surprised them.
4. Class notices the pattern: traditions are how values get handed down.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What do traditions teach that rules can't?

Facilitator tip: Model with your own tradition first — specificity is permission.

22 Kindness Radar

GRADES K-12 • 5 MINUTES

Two minutes of silent hunting for acts of kindness happening in the room right now.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. For two minutes, silently hunt for acts of kindness — happening now or remembered from today.
2. Log each catch: who did it, what they did, one word for its impact.
3. Share your best catch aloud.
4. Tally the class total. Watch it compete with yesterday's.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Why do kind acts hide in plain sight until we hunt them?

Facilitator tip: Run it daily for a week — the room physically changes.

23 Assumption Zapper

GRADES 5-12 • 5 MINUTES

Catch a snap judgment, write it down, then generate two other explanations for the same behavior.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Recall a time you sized someone up fast — a new student, a sub, a stranger.
2. Write the assumption plainly: “they’re rude,” “they’re stuck up.”
3. Write TWO other explanations for the exact same behavior.
4. Circle the story you’d want people to believe about you if roles were reversed.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What’s the difference between noticing a pattern and making a snap?

Facilitator tip: No one shares the assumption out loud. Zapping is private work.

24 Community Web

GRADES 2-12 • 5 MINUTES

A ball of yarn maps who depends on whom — then two students drop their strand and watch the web sag.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Stand in a circle. One student holds the yarn, names a school role (custodian, nurse, bus driver, teacher), and says one way that role helps them.
2. Still holding the strand, they toss the yarn to someone across the circle. Repeat.
3. Continue until the web is dense and beautiful.
4. Now two students quietly drop their strand. Watch what happens. Pick the strands back up.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What holds a community together when it’s strained — and who catches the slack?

Facilitator tip: Have a real ball of yarn ready; the physical sag IS the lesson.

Relationship Skills

Communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, and healthy boundaries.

25 Compliment Circle

GRADES K-12 · 5 MINUTES

Specific, sincere, ten seconds each — and the receiver may only say “thank you.”

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Form a circle. The rule: compliments must be specific — “You asked a great question in math today,” not “you’re nice.”
2. Each student gives one specific compliment to the person on their left.
3. The receiver’s only allowed response: “thank you.” Receiving is a skill too.
4. Optional: teacher goes last and aims one at the whole class.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Why is specific stronger than sweet?

Facilitator tip: Ban “you’re cool” and “you’re nice” — vagueness is the easy way out.

26 Sixty-Second Deep Listen

GRADES 3-12 · 5 MINUTES

One partner talks for 45 seconds; the other may only listen — then summarize before saying anything.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Pairs. Partner A talks for 45 seconds about anything real — their weekend, a worry, a win.
2. Partner B only listens. No questions, no advice, no “same thing happened to me.”
3. B’s only line: “What I heard was ____.”
4. Swap roles. Notice how strange and great pure listening feels.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What did you notice about yourself while staying quiet?

Facilitator tip: The “no advice” rule is the hardest and most important one.

27 I-Statement Sprint

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

Rebuild a “you always” accusation into an I-statement — same truth, softer landing.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Teacher writes a classic accusation on the board: “You ALWAYS take my stuff.”
2. Class rebuilds it: “I feel ____ when ____ because _____. I need _____.”
3. Pairs convert two more accusations from their own lives.
4. Test the tone: same words, delivered twice — once sharp, once steady. Hear the difference.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Why does starting with “I” lower the other person’s defenses?

Facilitator tip: Keep the formula on the wall all year. Refer to it in every real conflict.

28 Three-Part Repair

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

A real apology script: what I did, the impact it had, what I’ll do differently. No “but.”

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Pick something real you need to repair — small is fine.
2. Part 1: name exactly what you did. No “but,” no excuses.
3. Part 2: say the impact it had on the other person.
4. Part 3: state what you’ll do differently. Deliver it to a partner as rehearsal.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Why does “sorry” alone fall short?

Facilitator tip: The word “but” erases everything before it. Circle every “but” you find.

29 Team Handshake

GRADES K-12 • 5 MINUTES

Pairs invent a four-beat handshake, practice it to smooth, then teach it to another pair.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Pairs invent a 4-beat handshake. A beat = a move, a snap, a word, a pose.
2. Practice until it’s smooth — sloppy is fine, synchronized is the goal.
3. Teach your handshake to another pair.
4. Class vote: fastest, silliest, most likely to go viral.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What did building something small together do to the pair?

Facilitator tip: Use handshake pairs as a week-long “hello” ritual at the door.

30 Question Volley

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

A conversation where only questions are allowed — statements cost you a point.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Pairs pick a topic: lunch, weekends, shoes, anything light.
2. Sixty seconds: converse using ONLY questions. A statement = a point for your partner.
3. After the volley, debrief the hardest part.
4. Round two: new topic, questions only, but now follow-up questions are required.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What can a question do that a statement can't?

Facilitator tip: It gets loud and competitive — that's fine. Set a timer.

31 Boundary Blueprint

GRADES 5-12 • 5 MINUTES

Script a polite no for a real situation where you say yes but mean no.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Pick a real situation where you say “yes” but mean “no.”
2. Write the script: “I can't ____ because _____. What I CAN do is _____.”
3. Practice saying it twice — once too soft, once just right.
4. Partner scores the firmness 1-10. Adjust and run it again.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What's the difference between a wall and a boundary?

Facilitator tip: “What I CAN do is” is the secret ingredient — it keeps the door open.

32 Appreciation Post-It

GRADES 2-12 • 5 MINUTES

One handwritten note — what you did, and what it did to me — hand-delivered and watched being read.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Write one post-it to someone in the room (or the school): what they did + the impact on you.
2. Sign it. Anonymous doesn't count here.
3. Deliver it in person and watch them read it. That part matters.
4. Optional expansion: one post-it for a staff member — custodian, front office, bus driver.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What did their face do when they read it?

Facilitator tip: Watch-the-read is the moment the exercise becomes real.

Responsible Decision-Making

Evaluating consequences and making ethical, constructive choices.

33 Choice Compass

GRADES 4-12 • 5 MINUTES

Run a real decision through your top value and see which option the needle points to.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Pick a real decision you're facing — course, friendship, commitment, anything live.
2. Write your top value (from Speed Values Sort, or choose one: honesty, loyalty, fairness).
3. Run each option through it: "If I choose A, does it align or clash?" Do the same for B.
4. Choose the option closest to the needle. One sentence on why.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

When two values conflict, which one leads — and who taught you that?

Facilitator tip: There are no wrong compasses — only unexamined ones.

34 Consequence Chain

GRADES 3-12 • 5 MINUTES

Map one everyday choice to three ripples — today, this week, this year — and star the one you'd regret.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Take a school-day choice: skipping homework, sharing a secret, quitting a team.
2. Ripple 1: what happens today.
3. Ripple 2: what happens this week.
4. Ripple 3: what happens this year. Mark which ripples touch OTHER people, and star the ripple you'd regret most.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Why do ripples two and three get ignored in the moment?

Facilitator tip: Draw actual chains on paper — the visual makes distance real.

35 The Honest Hard Thing

GRADES 4-12 • 5 MINUTES

Script a truth you've been avoiding — what happened, no excuses, and the fix you'll offer.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Identify a truth you've been avoiding: broke something, didn't study, hurt a feeling.
2. Write the opener: "I need to tell you something hard."
3. Include: what happened (no excuses), and the fix you'll offer.
4. Rehearse once with a partner. Rehearsal makes delivery possible.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What makes honesty easier after the first sentence is out?

Facilitator tip: The opener sentence does half the work — it warns the listener to brace kindly.

36 Ethics Speed Round

GRADES 5-12 • 5 MINUTES

Five fast scenarios, fifteen seconds each — then defend ONE call you made.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Teacher reads five quick scenarios: found \$20 on the floor, a friend asks to copy homework, you see someone get excluded, a teammate cheats, you get too much change at the store.
2. Fifteen seconds per scenario: what would you do? Snap answers, no explanations yet.
3. Then pick ONE scenario and defend your call in three sentences.
4. Find the scenario that split the room — run it as a short debate.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Which scenario split the room, and why?

Facilitator tip: The split IS the lesson — ethics live in the gray, not the obvious.

37 Repair the Harm

GRADES 4-12 • 5 MINUTES

Contrast punishment with repair on a real scenario — and script what actually restores the community.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Scenario: a student damages another student's project.
2. Column A: list the punishments. Column B: list the repairs.
3. Script the repair: who was harmed, what they need, what repairing it looks like.
4. Compare: which column actually restores the community?

DEBRIEF QUESTION

When does “doing time” fix nothing — and what does?

Facilitator tip: This exercise quietly introduces restorative practice without the jargon.

38 Letter From 25

GRADES 5-12 • 5 MINUTES

Write four sentences to today's you from yourself at 25 — then seal it for the end of the semester.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Imagine yourself at 25. Same person, more road behind them.
2. Write four sentences to today's you: what to take seriously, what to shrug off, one thing to start, one thing to stop.
3. Seal it in an envelope with your name and today's date.
4. Teacher holds the envelopes. Open them on the last week of the semester.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What does the long view change about today's problem?

Facilitator tip: The sealed-envelope ritual is what makes this one unforgettable.

39 Footprint Check

GRADES 4-12 • 5 MINUTES

Run something you texted or posted through the face-to-face test — then rewrite it if it fails.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Think of something you texted or posted recently.
2. Run the test: would I say this exact thing, face to face, with witnesses?
3. If unsure: rewrite it as if you would. Feel the difference.
4. Delete or send — but now it's a decision instead of a reflex.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

What does a screen change about courage and cruelty?

Facilitator tip: No sharing of the actual post — the check is the point, not the content.

40 Impact Audit

GRADES 5-12 • 5 MINUTES

List every person a decision touches — near and far — then soften the hardest landing.

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Take one decision: cutting a team, changing a seating chart, a new class rule.
2. List everyone it touches — obvious names first, then the ones you almost forgot.
3. For two names on the list: how does it land on them?
4. Revise the decision — or its rollout — to soften the one hardest landing.

DEBRIEF QUESTION

Whose name was hardest to remember to list — and why?

Facilitator tip: The forgotten names (bus drivers, subs, siblings) teach the most.
