FACTSHEET: Soft Skills in Get SET Programs (Formerly LBS - Literacy and Basic Skills)

Based on a literature review Soft Skills in Literacy & Basic Skills Programs by Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) and Adaptimist,, this factsheet organizes best practices for incorporating the five soft skills from the Skills for Success program by:

1. Identifying key emotional and social deficits most associated with contemporary literacy challenges.2. Outlining recommendations for specific soft skill remediations that can support literacy development at both the individual and group levels.

3. Highlighting practical approaches for delivering soft skill programming in the most efficient way possible.

This factsheet is a summary of the challenges, strengths, and successes related to working with soft skills in Get SET programs.

INTRODUCTION

Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO), in partnership with Adaptimist Insights, conducted a review of research examining the relationship between soft skills and adult literacy. The research explores how emotional, social, and motivational factors influence literacy development and identifies opportunities for incorporating psychoeducational programming into existing Get SET programs.

This factsheet summarizes those findings to support agencies and practitioners.

CHALLENGES: EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL DEFICITS

Research shows that adult learners with literacy challenges often experience emotional and social barriers that interfere with learning and participation in Get SET programs.

These barriers frequently exist alongside cognitive literacy challenges and can limit the effectiveness of instruction if left unaddressed.

Emotional Challenges Related to Learning

Learners may experience:

- Anxiety when reading, writing, or completing literacy-related tasks

- Fear of making mistakes or being judged by others

- Difficulty managing stress during challenging or unfamiliar activities

- Emotional reactivity, including frustration or withdrawal, when literacy challenges are exposed

- Difficulty shifting emotional states to meet different task demands

These emotional responses can reduce attention, working memory, and comprehension, making learning more difficult even when instruction is appropriate.

Self-Concept & Confidence

The research highlights the role of negative self-concept in literacy development. Learners may:

- Believe they are incapable of improving their literacy skills

- Interpret past educational experiences as evidence of failure

- Underestimate their ability to succeed despite effort

- Avoid challenges due to low confidence

Low self-efficacy can reduce persistence and willingness to engage in new or demanding literacy tasks.

Motivation & Avoidance

Motivation is closely tied to emotional safety and perceived control.

Learners may:

- Rely on avoidance strategies to manage anxiety

- Withdraw from tasks that feel risky or overwhelming

- Engage only in activities perceived as safe or familiar

- Disengage from programs when emotional strain outweighs perceived benefit

While avoidance can reduce short-term stress, it limits opportunities for learning and skill development.

Social Challenges & Stigma

Social factors strongly influence literacy participation. Learners may:

- Fear stigma related to reading and writing difficulties

- Hide literacy challenges from peers, instructors, or employers

- Avoid asking for help even when support is available

- Limit participation in group activities

Fear of judgment can reduce collaboration, peer learning, and open communication.

Group Learning Impacts

Emotional and social challenges affect not only individual learners but also group dynamics. These challenges can:

- Limit participation in group discussions

- Reduce opportunities for collaborative problem solving

- Increase tension or disengagement within learning groups

- Place additional emotional demands on instructors

Together, these group-level impacts can reduce the effectiveness of collaborative learning approaches and limit the benefits of peer support within literacy programs.

Implications for Get SET programs

The research suggests that:

- Cognitive literacy instruction alone may not address the full range of barriers learners experience

- Emotional and social challenges can undermine engagement and retention

- Addressing these challenges can help learners participate more fully in literacy instruction

Recognizing and addressing emotional and social challenges alongside literacy instruction can help learners engage more fully, remain in programs longer, and make stronger progress toward their learning goals.

STRENGTHS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOFT SKILL REMEDIATIONS

The research suggests that psychoeducational programming focused on soft skill development can help address emotional, social, and motivational barriers to literacy learning when integrated into existing Get SET programs. Adult learners bring a range of existing strengths that support literacy development, many of which align with the five Skills for Success, and these can be recognized and built upon.

Communication

Communication involves understanding information, sharing ideas, and interacting with others. Learners may demonstrate strengths such as:

- Listening to instructions and responding appropriately

- Explaining ideas verbally, even when writing is more difficult

- Asking questions to clarify meaning

- Using everyday language to describe experiences, needs, and goals

These strengths support comprehension, participation, and confidence in literacy learning.

Communication Remediations

The research recommends supporting learners to:

- Develop reflective listening skills, including paraphrasing and clarifying meaning

- Express questions, needs, and ideas clearly and respectfully

- Communicate emotions without defensiveness or blame

- Improve understanding of spoken and written instructions in social contexts

- Interpret feedback more accurately rather than as personal criticism

At the group level, the research recommends:

- Teaching communication skills explicitly rather than assuming they are implicit

- Supporting respectful dialogue during group learning

- Improving feedback exchanges between learners and instructors

Building on existing communication strengths while addressing gaps can help learners engage more fully in literacy

Collaboration

Collaboration involves working with others to complete tasks and achieve shared goals. Learners may demonstrate strengths such as:

- Willingness to support or encourage peers

- Learning through discussion and shared activities

- Participating in group tasks when a safe environment is established

- Drawing on social connections to navigate challenges

These strengths can reduce isolation and create opportunities for peer learning and mutual support.

Collaboration Remediations

The research recommends supporting learners to:

- Learn how and when to ask for help

- Participate more fully in group learning activities

- Reduce avoidance of collaboration due to fear of stigma

- Recognize collaboration as a learning strategy rather than a weakness

At the group level, the research recommends:

- Normalizing help-seeking within learning environments

- Structuring opportunities for peer support and shared problem solving

- Building trust and psychological safety in groups

Building on existing collaboration strengths while addressing gaps can help learners engage more fully in literacy instruction and group learning.

Problem Solving

Problem solving involves identifying challenges, considering options, and making decisions.

Learners may demonstrate strengths such as:

- Using lived experience to address everyday problems

- Finding practical solutions in real-world situations

- Learning through trial and error

- Applying reasoning skills to tasks such as planning or budgeting

These strengths support independence and confidence in literacy-related tasks.

Problem Solving Remediations

The research recommends supporting learners to:

- Use structured approaches to identify problems and explore options

- Recognize how stress and emotions influence decision-making

- Reduce fear-based avoidance of problem-solving tasks

- Consider both short and long-term consequences of decisions

- Persist through uncertainty rather than disengaging

At the group level for problem solving, the research recommends:

- Using group problem-solving activities to model decision-making

- Encouraging discussion of different approaches and solutions

- Reducing fear of being "wrong" during collaborative tasks

Building on existing problem-solving strengths while addressing gaps can help learners engage more fully in literacy instruction and group learning.

Adaptability

Adaptability involves adjusting goals and behaviour in response to change. Learners may demonstrate strengths such as:

- Managing changes in work, family, or living situations

- Adjusting routines when circumstances shift

- Persisting through setbacks

- Drawing on past experience to navigate new situations

These strengths support resilience and continued engagement in learning.

Adaptability Remediations

The research recommends supporting learners to:

- Develop flexibility when tasks, goals, or expectations change

- Use strategies to manage setbacks and frustration

- Challenge negative automatic thoughts related to failure or change

- Recognize existing skills as transferable to new situations

At the group level, the research recommends:

- Designing learning environments that allow for adjustment and iteration

- Supporting learners through transitions within programs

- Normalizing change as part of the learning process

Building on existing adaptability strengths while addressing gaps can help learners engage more fully in literacy instruction and group learning.

Creativity & Innovation

Creativity and innovation involve exploring ideas, asking questions, and trying new approaches. Learners may demonstrate strengths such as:

- Curiosity about topics that matter to them

- Willingness to explore different ways of completing tasks

- Using storytelling or examples to express ideas

- Making connections between personal experience and new information

These strengths support engagement, comprehension, and problem solving in literacy learning.

Creativity & Innovation Remediations

The research recommends supporting learners to:

- Ask questions to deepen understanding

- Generate ideas without fear of judgment

- Explore multiple approaches to literacy tasks

- Express ideas even when unsure of correctness

At the group level, the research recommends:

- Creating space for idea-sharing and exploration

- Encouraging discussion and questioning rather than only correct answers

- Supporting experimentation within learning activities

Building on existing creativity and innovation strengths while addressing gaps can help learners engage more fully in literacy instruction and group learning.

Foundational Remediations

In addition to the five soft skills included in the Skills for Success framework, the research report identifies several areas that influence how learners engage with literacy instruction and benefit from soft skill development. The research highlights the importance of addressing the following:

Emotional Regulation

- Supporting learners to recognize emotional responses that arise during literacy tasks

- Building skills to manage anxiety, frustration, and fear related to reading and writing

- Increasing tolerance for discomfort when engaging in challenging learning activities

- Helping learners shift emotional responses to better match different learning tasks

Self-Concept & Confidence

- Supporting learners to challenge negative beliefs about their ability to learn

- Strengthening confidence in the possibility of literacy improvement

- Helping learners recognize progress and existing abilities rather than focusing only on deficits

- Building a sense of control and agency over learning goals.

Motivation & Engagement

- Reducing avoidance behaviours linked to fear or past learning experiences

- Supporting learners to develop meaningful reasons for engaging in literacy learning

- Increasing persistence by strengthening emotional safety and learner autonomy

- Encouraging sustained participation rather than short-term compliance

Together, these foundational skills support learners' ability to engage with communication, collaboration, problem solving, adaptability, and creativity, and to benefit more fully from literacy from literacy instruction.

Recognizing and building on these strengths allows Get SET programs to take an asset-based approach to literacy development and to support learners in using skills they already have to strengthen reading, writing, and communication.

STRATEGIES: HIGHLIGHTING PRACTICAL APPROACHES

The research emphasizes that psychoeducational programming is most effective when it is integrated into existing literacy instruction, rather than delivered as separate or stand-alone programming. Within Get SET programs, this means embedding soft skill development into current structures, activities, and instructional practices.

Integrating Psychoeducational Programming Into Existing Instruction

The research suggests that Get SET programs can:

- Embed emotional, social, and motivational skill development into reading, writing, numeracy, and digital skills instruction

- Use real-world literacy tasks as opportunities to practice communication, collaboration, problem solving, adaptability, and creativity

- Address emotional and social barriers as part of learning activities rather than as separate topics

- Avoid creating parallel programming that duplicates existing instruction

This approach supports efficiency by strengthening literacy instruction rather than adding new program layers.

Using Targeted & Modular Approaches

The research highlights that soft skill needs vary across learners and contexts. To support efficient delivery, Get SET programs can:

- Use modular approaches that allow instructors to focus on specific soft skills as needed

- Deliver targeted supports rather than broad, one-size-fits-all programming

- Adjust the intensity and focus of psychoeducational content based on learner needs

- Integrate short, focused activities rather than lengthy standalone sessions

Targeted delivery helps ensure that time and resources are used where they are most effective.

Assessment-informed Delivery

The research emphasizes the importance of using assessment to guide programming decisions. Get SET programs can:

- Use assessments to identify emotional, social, and motivational barriers that affect learning

- Focus psychoeducational programming on priority areas rather than addressing all soft skills equally

- Avoid unnecessary remediation when learners already demonstrate strength in certain areas

- Use assessment information to support both individual and group-level instruction

Assessment-informed delivery supports efficiency and reduces instructional overload.

Leveraging Group-based Learning

The research notes that group learning environments can support both individual and collective skill development. To deliver programming efficiently, Get SET programs can:

- Use group activities to support communication, collaboration, and problem solving

- Design group learning tasks that reduce fear of judgment and normalize participation

- Support peer learning as a way to reinforce emotional and social skills

- Address group dynamics intentionally to improve overall learning conditions

Group-based approaches allow psychoeducational programming to benefit multiple learners simultaneously.

Supporting Instructor Capacity and Sustainability

The research recognizes that program sustainability depends on realistic expectations for staff and systems. To support efficient delivery, Get SET programs can:

- Build on instructors' existing roles rather than adding specialized positions

- Integrate psychoeducational strategies into everyday instructional practice

- Use shared language and simple frameworks to support consistency

- Avoid approaches that significantly increase administrative or preparation demands

- Sustainable delivery helps ensure psychoeducational programming can be maintained over time.

Aligning With Existing Program Goals

The research emphasizes that psychoeducational programming should support, not compete with, program objectives.

Get SET programs can:

- Align soft skill development with literacy and employment-related goals

- Integrate psychoeducational programming into existing outcomes and reporting structures

- Use consistent language across instruction, assessment, and learner support

- Position soft skill development as part of literacy progress rather than an additional requirement

Alignment supports clarity, efficiency, and program coherence.

When psychoeducational programming is integrated, targeted, and aligned with existing Get SET structures, it can reduce barriers to learning, support learner engagement, and strengthen literacy outcomes without adding unnecessary complexity to program delivery.

CONCLUSION

The research reviewed for this report highlights the importance of addressing emotional, social, and motivational factors alongside cognitive literacy instruction. Soft skills play a critical role in how learners engage with literacy programs, interact with others, and persist in learning.

Incorporating psychoeducational programming into existing Get SET instruction can help reduce barriers, improve engagement, and strengthen literacy outcomes. When delivered efficiently and thoughtfully, soft skill development can

enhance both learner success and program effectiveness

This factsheet is based on the report Soft Skills in Literacy & Basic Skills Programs which was researched and written by Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) and Adaptimist.

To learn more about our organization, visit our website here.

This Employment Ontario service is funded in part by the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario. The opinions expressed in this document are those of Community Literacy of Ontario and do not necessarily reflect those of our funders.

Canada   EMPLOYMENT ONTARIO   Ontario

Get SET
Skills, Education and Training