

Lessons Between the Lines: Exploring Social and Emotional Learning in Children's Television

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**Abstract**

Early childhood represents a critical period for the development of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), a process increasingly influenced by screen media. As children's television serves as a primary tool for SEL, it is important to understand the mechanisms through which these programs model SEL messages. This study investigates how contemporary children's television conveys SEL through storytelling, character, and educational design. Using a qualitative content analysis, this research examined twenty-four randomly selected episodes in eight popular children's television programs designed for children aged 2 to 8: *Handy Manny* (2006), *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), *Doc McStuffins* (2012), *Bluey* (2018), *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019), *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023), *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), and *Carl the Collector* (2024). The categories of analysis stemmed from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, while also examining three supplemental aspects: (1) aspects of diversity, inclusion and representation, (2) narrative techniques, and (3) formal features. The results show that all five CASEL skills were present across the sample, though their presentation took different forms. In addition, these shows successfully utilized different SEL delivery strategies, such as explicit and implicit approaches, and adult or peer-to-peer modeling. Ultimately, this research suggests that contemporary children's television has moved beyond simple lectures to utilizing a variety of techniques to convey SEL messaging, creating a diverse social world that helps build emotional skills over time and serves as a valuable tool for parents and educators to support early childhood development.

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## Chapter 1: Problem and Significance

### Introduction

When I was a child, I remember watching an episode of *Sesame Street (1969)* where Zoe and Rosita accidentally knocked over Big Bird's block tower. Big Bird saw Snuffy near the tower and started to blame him without listening, which made Snuffy feel sad and confused because he hadn't done anything wrong. Later, Big Bird discovered what had really happened and apologized to Snuffy for not listening to him. Meanwhile Zoe and Rosita found the courage to say "sorry" to Big Bird. They all ended up sharing a group hug and rebuilding the tower together. To this day, I still think of a group hug as a way to reconcile with my friends and family. This moment shows how a single scene, viewed during childhood, can have a lasting impact on one's understanding of social relationships. At the time, the show felt like a simple story about friendship and forgiveness, but looking back, I realize it was also a powerful lesson in honesty, empathy, forgiveness, and repairing relationships. These easy to follow stories shown in children's media including *Sesame Street (1969)*, helped children like me learn different competencies such as recognizing emotions, taking responsibility, and working together to solve problems.

For more than three decades, scholars and educators have recognized Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a basis for children's emotional and educational development. SEL is a process through which children gain and effectively use the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Zins & Elias, 2007). Researchers such as Elias et al. (1997) and Schonert-Reichl (2019) have stated that

SEL skills are the building blocks for academic achievement, positive mental health outcomes, and prosocial behavior. International organizations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have also identified social and emotional competencies as key components of twenty-first century learning, recognizing that emotional intelligence is necessary for thriving in diverse, rapidly changing societies (Howells, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Integrating these competencies into early learning experiences, including children's media, shows a widespread belief that education, whether in classrooms or through children's media, should intentionally promote SEL as outcomes of early learning.

Early childhood represents a formative period when children establish the foundations of emotional understanding, empathy, and honesty (Swider-Cios et al., 2023). During the preschool years, children begin to recognize emotions in themselves and others, learn to share, cooperate, and resolve conflicts at a basic level. These developmental tasks are achieved not only through direct interactions with caregivers and peers but also, increasingly, through mediated experiences such as television and digital storytelling (Linebarger & Vaala, 2010). Educational programs that incorporate SEL principles, like *Sesame Street* (1969), *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), or *Doc McStuffins* (2012), extend the reach of social learning in the home environment.

To understand how media affects children in early ages, we need to dive into some developmental theories by Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky; together they provide a foundation for understanding why SEL content in media can strongly influence children's growth. During early childhood, children are forming trust, independence, and initiative while also learning to express emotions and understand others (Santrock, 2023). As Erikson (1950) suggests, these stages are

critical for developing confidence and social competence, and media that portrays empathy, problem-solving, and cooperation can help reinforce these skills. Similarly, Piaget's (1952), work highlights that preschoolers learn best through concrete examples and symbolic play, meaning that stories and characters who verbalize emotions or resolve conflicts provide important cognitive scaffolding for emotional reasoning. Vygotsky et al. (1978) sociocultural theory further emphasizes that children learn through guided interaction, something SEL-focused media can simulate by modeling supportive dialogue and collaboration. Taken together, these perspectives explain why thoughtfully designed media can serve as a powerful tool to help young viewers practice SEL skills during their formative years.

While children's media has been acknowledged for its educational potential, there remains a gap in understanding how SEL is represented and communicated within media content itself. Previous research demonstrates that exposure to educational and prosocial media can promote children's empathy, emotional regulation, and social skills (Linebarger & Vaala, 2010). However, many of these studies focus primarily on audience outcomes rather than the specific narrative and visual mechanisms through which SEL principles are conveyed. A content analysis offers an opportunity to identify the ways in which the SEL components are explicitly or implicitly embedded in children's media.

Through a detailed content analysis of widely viewed children's television programs, this study explores how SEL themes are presented to young audiences with additional focus on how diversity, inclusion, and representation are integrated within SEL messages, highlighting how children's media can promote equitable representation of different cultures, abilities, and backgrounds. Then, narrative techniques and formal features are investigated as a way to convey

SEL messages. By providing an in-depth understanding of how SEL principles and inclusive values are embedded within media narratives and formal features, this research offers insights for educators, parents, and content creators seeking to leverage children's media as a tool for fostering social and emotional development in increasingly diverse societies.

### **Current Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how children's television programs promote Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) through their storytelling, characters, narratives, and formal features. Through a content analysis, I examine a selection of television shows designed for young children with SEL themes in mind. The study focuses on identifying the types of social and emotional competencies represented in these programs, the creative techniques used to communicate them, and the ways in which diversity, inclusion, and representation are integrated into SEL related messages.

This research focused on three key questions: (1) What kinds of social and emotional learning are exhibited in content for young children's television programs? (2) How are these SEL indicators presented through stories and animation? (3) In what ways, if any, are issues of diversity, inclusion, and representation used to further children's understanding of SEL skills? Through these questions, I aim to highlight how key SEL competencies are presented, narratively and visually, in children's television content.

By analyzing selected episodes from multiple children's programs, this study investigates how such programs model recognizing one's emotions, regulating emotions, understanding and empathizing with others, forming and maintaining relationships, and making choices about

personal and social behavior. Ultimately, this research highlighted how children's media can intentionally illustrate social and emotional growth through thoughtful and developmentally-appropriate storytelling.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Social and Emotional Learning in Children

As discussed previously, according to Zins and Elias (2007), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the developmental process through which children acquire the necessary skills to regulate their emotions, demonstrate empathy, establish healthy relationships, and make ethical decisions. Throughout history, humans have learned by observing, interacting, and imitating each other, beginning in childhood. From a young age, children watch and mimic the actions, emotions, and behaviors of those around them, especially parents, caregivers, and peers. This learning process is a key part of their social and emotional development.

A framework developed in 1994, by a group of researchers named the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), categorizes SEL skills into five key competencies: (1) social awareness, which includes taking the perspective of and empathizing with others, and understanding social and ethical norms for behavior; (2) responsible decision-making, which involves making constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards; (3) self-awareness, which involves recognizing one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and understanding how they influence behavior; (4) self-management, which entails effectively regulating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in various situations and settings, and achieving personal goals; and lastly, (5) relationship skills, which cover building and maintaining healthy relationships, communicating clearly, listening attentively, cooperating with others, resisting inappropriate social pressure, constructively resolving conflicts, and seeking and offering help when needed (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015).

## **Developmental Foundations**

To understand how media content influences children during these formative years, it is necessary to examine foundational developmental theories. From a psychosocial perspective, Erik Erikson's theory provides a framework for understanding why SEL content is particularly significant during childhood. Erik Erikson (1902–1994) was a German-born developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst best known for his theory of psychosocial development, which expanded from Freud's ideas by explaining how social experiences shape personality and identity across the entire lifespan. Erikson's theory (1950), proposed that individuals progress through eight stages of life, each defined by a central developmental conflict that must be resolved to promote a healthy sense of self. Successful resolution of these conflicts leads to psychological strengths such as trust, independence, and competence, while failure can result in insecurity, guilt, or inferiority across an individual's lifespan (Erikson, 1950).

The first five stages of Erikson's theory (1950) are especially relevant for childhood and adolescence. In the trust vs. mistrust stage (infancy, 0–18 months), children develop a sense of safety and predictability when caregivers respond consistently and warmly. Media designed for this age can reinforce this stage by demonstrating nurturing relationships and emotional security. During autonomy vs. shame and doubt (toddlerhood, 1½–3 years), children begin asserting independence. Positive portrayals of characters learning through trial and error, or showing perseverance despite mistakes, help promote confidence and reduce feelings of shame. The initiative vs. guilt stage (preschool, 3–5 years) marks a period when children express creativity and curiosity through play and social exploration. Media that models curiosity, empathy, and problem-solving helps children develop initiative while managing guilt or fear of failure. Later,

in industry vs. inferiority (school age, 6–12 years), children focus on mastering skills and comparing themselves to peers. Storylines that highlight teamwork, perseverance, and individual strengths encourage a sense of accomplishment and counteract feelings of inferiority. Finally, identity vs. role confusion (adolescence, 12–18 years) centers on self-discovery and belonging stages where diverse, relatable characters in media can help adolescents form positive identities. Understanding these developmental stages reveals why SEL-focused media is critical during childhood and how it can potentially influence behaviors into adolescence. The emotional and social competencies taught in the media, such as empathy, decision-making, and self-regulation, indirectly support children's ability to navigate Erikson's psychosocial challenges (Erikson, 1950).

While Erikson (1950) emphasizes the psychosocial stages of growth, Jean Piaget's (1952) cognitive development theory provides further insight into how children's cognitive frameworks interpret and internalize SEL concepts. Piaget proposed that children progress through four distinct stages of development: the sensorimotor stage (birth to age 2), where learning occurs through sensory experience; the preoperational stage (ages 2 to 7), characterized by symbolic thought and egocentrism; the concrete operational stage (ages 7 to 11), where logical thought develops; and the formal operational stage (age 12 and up), involving abstract reasoning. For children in the preoperational stage, the ability to think symbolically allows them to engage with imaginative media play; however, their inherent egocentrism often makes it difficult to view situations from another's perspective (Piaget, 1952). This developmental limitation shows why explicit modeling of empathy, sharing, and cooperation in media is vital. When television characters verbalize feelings, explain motives, or resolve conflicts, they provide tangible

examples that structure perspective taking and emotional reasoning skills preschoolers are just beginning to acquire. In this way, SEL-focused media serves as a bridge, translating complex emotional and social ideas into narrative based experiences that align with children's developing social cognition.

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory supports the frameworks of Piaget (1952) and Erikson (1950) by placing SEL development within social interaction and guided learning. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that children construct understanding through collaborative experiences within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the range of skills a child can achieve with the assistance of "more knowledgeable others" that they could not yet master alone. In the context of modern development, SEL media can serve as a virtual "more knowledgeable other," modeling emotional expression, problem-solving, and understanding through guided examples. When young viewers observe characters negotiating conflicts or practicing self regulation, they engage in mediated forms of social learning that mirror the scaffolding process central to Vygotsky's theory. This representation helps children begin to internalize strategies for emotional control and self understanding.

Beyond the concept of scaffolding, Vygotsky (1978) argues that the mind develops primarily through social engagement, with culture providing the essential cultural tools, such as language, signs, and symbols, necessary to master inner thought processes. These tools act as intermediaries that allow children to transform external social interactions into internal cognitive functions. When children internalize the dialogue or symbolic problem-solving scripts used by media characters, they are acquiring the linguistic resources needed to regulate their own emotions. Consequently, the symbols presented in educational media do not merely entertain;

they provide the foundation for a child's "inner speech." This internalization of social dialogue into private thought is a critical milestone, allowing children to use the language of the media they consume to guide their own social and emotional behavior in the real world (Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Current Children's Media Habit**

Building upon these developmental frameworks, media can be viewed as an extension of the environment, a digital space where children learn and grow through observation and imitation. Through television shows, movies, and other forms of media, children are exposed to various social situations and emotional responses, which they can learn to understand and replicate. For example, characters in children's programming often demonstrate problem-solving skills, empathy, and effective communication, offering children an example of how to handle similar problems in their own lives. Media can also help children with different perspectives and cultures, improving their empathy for others. Therefore, content creators have an important role in maximizing the benefits of media as a tool for SEL in children while minimizing potential harm (Rajawat, 2017).

In today's digital era, media is an almost constant presence in the lives of children under the age of eight. From the time they wake up to the time they go to sleep, many young children interact with screens through television, streaming platforms, and digital devices (Council on Communications and Media, 2016). According to Common Sense Media's 2025 census, in 2024

children under the age of two spend an hour and three minutes a day on media; children between the ages of two and four spend an average of two hours and eight minutes per day; and children between the ages of five and eight spend an average of three hours and twenty-eight minutes per day. The report shows that children are spending a significant amount of their day on media: On average, children ages zero to eight spend two and a half hours per day engaging with screen media while guidelines recommend a maximum of one hour (Council on Communications and Media, 2016; World Health Organization, 2019; Suh et al., 2024) Of this average time, 60% consists of watching television or video viewing. Although the portion of time spent on television and video viewing decreased from 73% in 2020 to 60% in 2024, the overall time spent with screen media remained consistent at approximately two and a half hours per day (Common Sense Media, 2025). This demonstrates that despite the proportional decrease, television remains the most significant component of children's media usage and needs continuous attention.

Notably, research indicates that children's screen time surged significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic and has not returned to pre-pandemic baseline, establishing a higher new normal for daily consumption (Madigan et al., 2022). Nearly 40% of children have their own tablet by age two, and about one in four own a cellphone by the age of eight. Although the total time spent on screens has remained relatively stable at this elevated level, the types of media children consume, and the platforms through which they access this media, are shifting. Traditional half hour, linear television viewing has decreased, while short form video platforms such as YouTube Shorts and TikTok have become tremendously popular among young audiences. For example, almost half of children under eight have viewed short videos on these

platforms, and a growing proportion do so daily (Common Sense Media, 2020; Common Sense Media, 2025).

While greater access to media creates learning opportunities, it also presents notable challenges. Decades of research on educational television have shown that programs intentionally designed around developmental goals can effectively support SEL (Mares & Woodward, 2005). However, the same cannot be said for much of today's algorithm-driven content. Short form platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts often prioritize speed, novelty, and entertainment over intentional learning outcomes. Their rapid pacing and unpredictable content exposure can overstimulate young viewers, limit opportunities for reflection, and model inappropriate or superficial social interactions (Lillard & Peterson, 2011). Unlike structured educational programs, these platforms rarely provide consistent emotional modeling or moral reasoning. Therefore, this study prioritizes the analysis of traditional, long-form children's media (such as 7- to 11-minute episodes). These formats offer the necessary narrative time and structural consistency to promote emotional resilience and positive social growth, distinguishing them from unregulated digital content (Fisch & Truglio, 2001; Kirkorian et al., 2009; Lauricella et al., 2015).

### **How Children Comprehend Educational Content from Media**

Establishing the prevalence of media in early childhood requires an analysis into the cognitive mechanisms behind consumption. While various theoretical frameworks exist, this section examines two models relevant to the intersection of story and education: the Clifford, Gunter and McAleer (1995) framework and Fisch's (2000) Capacity Model. These frameworks

provide a foundation for understanding how children transition from observing a screen to extracting skills that serve as the building blocks for SEL.

The Clifford et al. (1995) Framework posits that a child's ability to comprehend television is fundamentally determined by their ability to identify the program's genre and apply the appropriate cognitive framework, or schema, to process the information. The model creates a primary distinction between drama (narrative-based) and factual programming, arguing that children approach these two types of content with different sets of expectations and processing strategies. When watching drama, children use a narrative schema, which focuses on relationships, character motivations, and emotional arcs. They expect a story with a beginning, middle, and end, and they prioritize understanding human interactions. Conversely, when watching factual programming, children switch to another schema, where they expect direct information delivery and prioritize the retention of facts rather than plot progression. According to Clifford et al. (1995), learning occurs most effectively when the program provides clear cues that allow the child to select the correct schema immediately. If a child knows they are watching a story, they activate their story knowledge to make sense of the events; if they are unsure of the genre, their processing becomes split, and comprehension does not occur smoothly.

A main component of the Clifford et al., (1995) framework is the argument that structural predictability is the key driver of comprehension, particularly for young children. The model suggests that drama programs are most effective for learning when they adhere to a familiar story, consistent pattern of events that the child can anticipate. For example, a show that follows a rigid, repetitive structure (such as an introduction, a central conflict, a struggle, and a resolution) significantly reduces the cognitive load placed on the viewer. Because the child

already understands the format of the episode, they do not need to extend mental energy figuring out the plot's storyline. Instead, they can allocate their cognitive capacity to understanding the specific content embedded within that structure, such as an SEL lesson. Therefore, Clifford et al., (1995) argue that for educational content to be successfully encoded, the narrative must be structured and coherent. When the storytelling pattern is distinct and repetitive, it acts as a scaffold, allowing children to slot new social and emotional concepts into an existing mental framework they already understand.

In 2000, Fisch proposed a model to demonstrate how television and media, in a broader context, affect children. The proposed model, named the Capacity Model, explains how viewers process and comprehend educational television by focusing on the distribution of limited working memory resources between narrative and educational content. It identifies three key components: the processing of the narrative, the processing of educational content, and the distance between the two. The model suggests that viewers' comprehension of television involves the simultaneous processing of both visual and auditory information, which utilizes working memory. This can result in longer response times and poorer performance in tasks that require synchronous processing (Fisch, 2000).

The Capacity Model highlights that when educational content is tangential to the narrative, both elements compete for limited working memory resources, potentially impairing comprehension of the educational material. This means when educational content in a program is not closely related to the story being told, both the educational and narrative aspects compete for the viewer's limited mental resources, specifically working memory. The competition can make it harder for young children to understand the educational message because their brains are trying

to process both the story and the lesson at the same time. For young children, when educational content is integrated into the story, it becomes easier for them to follow and learn because their cognitive resources are not divided. Viewer characteristics such as prior knowledge, familiarity of situations, story schemas, interest in the subject matter, verbal reasoning ability, and short-term memory can reduce the processing demands. Similarly, program characteristics like narrative complexity, coherence and the need for inferences also influence these demands (Aladé & Nathanson, 2016; Fisch, 2000). Overall, the Capacity Model provides a framework for understanding how working memory resources are allocated between narrative and educational content, explaining the varying degrees of comprehension among different viewers and program types.

## **Effects of Media on Young Children**

### ***Risks and Developmental Concerns***

Digital technology usage among children has raised concerns about its potential negative influence, particularly when usage is early and prolonged during cognitive developmental stages. The American Academy of Pediatrics (Council on Communications and Media, 2016) warned against its harmful effects on young children's development, linking media violence to aggressive behavior and screen-based media to childhood obesity. For example, prolonged television viewing can increase unhealthy food consumption and disrupt sleep habits in preschoolers. Additionally, there are concerns that extensive digital technology usage may reduce children's willingness to engage in non-technology activities and negatively impact their cognitive test scores, though these correlations may not hold when family characteristics are considered.

The negative effects of media are worsened when combined with other factors such as obesity and problem behaviors. Furthermore, long-term technology use can be detrimental when influenced by parental attitudes, the content of media, and specific parent-child dynamics (Council on Communications and Media, 2016). Researchers also found that parents' media habits significantly influence their children's media interactions (Konca, 2022). Thus, parents play a crucial role as facilitators, teachers, and gatekeepers in managing children's media usage.

### ***Prosocial Media and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)***

Despite the downsides to media consumption, there are also many advantages for children in terms of learning and developing skills. Currently, the world is heavily based on different types of media consumption, specifically great amounts of educational videos targeted at young children (Yap & Lim, 2024). Educational media has been shown to support children's cognitive and language development when designed with evidence-based learning principles. Studies indicate that high-quality programs such as *Sesame Street (1969)* and *Dora the Explorer (2000)* enhance early literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills by combining visual cues, repetition, and narrative structures (Fisch, 2004; Linebarger & Walker, 2005; Rogers et al., 2021). Beyond academic learning, digital media can help with creativity, social emotional growth, and self-expression. Research shows that children who engage with creative digital tools, such as storytelling or art-based apps, develop stronger imaginative and reflective thinking skills (Burke & Marsh, 2013; Stevens & Takeuchi, 2011).

Recent findings from the 2025 Common Sense Census suggest that media can offer meaningful opportunities for learning, creativity, and connection when children engage with high-quality, age-appropriate content. Around two-thirds of parents (67%) report that media

helps their children learn new things, while more than half believe it helps with creativity (55%) and strengthens technological literacy (62%). Many parents also express enthusiasm for media that promotes positive messages such as kindness and cooperation (72%) and that exposes children to diverse people, cultures, and places (65%) (Common Sense Media, 2025). These findings align with decades of research showing that educational and prosocial programming, such as *Sesame Street* (1969) and *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), supports key components of SEL, including empathy, self-regulation, and relationship skills (Fisch & Truglio, 2001; Lauricella et al., 2015).

Educational media can serve as a space for children to observe and internalize emotional expression, moral reasoning, and problem-solving before applying these skills in real-life interactions (Bandura, 2001). For example, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) helped children show additional social skills and better emotional recognition and understanding (Rasmussen et al., 2019). Social competence is a key aspect of SEL, defined as the effectiveness in partaking in social interactions with peers (Eisenberg and Fabes, 2006; Rubin et al., 1998). Children with higher emotional competence can regulate emotions and perform better in their overall well-being (e.g., Blankson et al., 2017; Denham & Brown, 2010; Di Maggio et al., 2016; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). Early childhood is when children's social emotional behavior forms, along with synaptic connections, making it the most important period for learning (Gou & Perceval, 2023; Lenhart & Richter, 2024; Rajawat, 2017). While high-quality programming can promote significant SEL developmental gains, these effects do not occur in a vacuum. The degree to which a child internalizes SEL lessons is largely moderated by the social context of the home, specifically, the role of parental mediation.

### **The Role of Parental Mediation and Co-viewing**

The Common Sense Media report (2025) emphasizes that context matters; media's benefits are greatest when parents co-view, discuss, and help children interpret what they see. Studies have shown that co-viewing and active mediation techniques have led to increased meaningful interactions and deeper understanding (Council on Communications and Media, 2016). This effect has been observed not only in educational content but also in interactive apps and even certain video games. When adults help interpret storylines and connect lessons to daily life, shared engagement nurtures empathy, understanding and emotional regulation (Council on Communications and Media, 2016).

Intentional media use also supports psychosocial development. Prosocial and inclusive programming enhances empathy, tolerance, and respect in young viewers (Coyne et al., 2018). When co-viewing occurs, it offers emotional guidance, allowing children to ask questions about what they see and relate screen lessons to their own lives. When positive social and emotional behaviors are modeled on screen and reinforced through caregiver conversation and example, children are more likely to apply them in real-world interactions (Barr, 2019). Over time, intentional and guided media engagement helps children internalize moral and emotional lessons and begin to reason about fairness, inclusion, and other complex social ideas (Barr, 2019).

### **Why Representation Matters**

Diversity, inclusion and representation are elements in children's media, particularly as they relate to encouraging SEL. Diversity refers to the representation of various identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and cultural background, and inclusion emphasizes

creating environments where all children feel valued and understood. Research has shown that diverse and inclusive content in children's media can positively influence attitudes and behaviors (Tukachinsky et al., 2017). Representation in children's media plays a critical role in shaping self-concept, social understanding, and a sense of belonging. When children see characters who reflect their own identities and experiences, they are more likely to develop positive self-esteem and cultural pride (Tukachinsky et al., 2017). Conversely, the absence or stereotyping of underrepresented groups can reinforce feelings of marginalization and limit children's perceptions of what they can achieve (Martins & Harrison, 2012). Exposure to diverse characters not only validates the experiences of minority children but also promotes empathy and perspective taking among majority group viewers (Martins & Harrison, 2012). In this way, representation acts as both a mirror and a window, allowing children to see themselves reflected and to view the experiences of others, thereby strengthening key components of SEL such as empathy, social awareness, and respect for diversity (Jackson, 2023).

For instance, programs like *Sesame Street* (1969) and its international adaptations have successfully used diverse characters and storylines to promote social cohesion and reduce biases by addressing complex issues, such as ethnic and cultural conflicts with measurable success in respect and understanding among children (Cole et al., 2008). Other adaptations of *Sesame Street* (1969) also addressed intergroup conflict by focusing on peer-level interactions and promoting prosocial behaviors such as fairness and sharing. Through carefully designed scenarios, the program encouraged children to resolve conflicts constructively, emphasizing collaboration over antisocial actions. Research findings revealed that, despite being exposed to intense negative stereotypes about opposing groups, children were more likely to apply principles of fairness and

even express friendship in peer-to-peer situations (Cole et al., 2008). This demonstrates the unique potential of child-centered media interventions to promote understanding and reduce biases, providing a powerful example of how diverse, inclusive, and representative content can bridge social divides and support SEL.

Research on representation in children's media highlights significant progress in recent years, though disparities remain across race, gender, and ability. Studies of popular children's television programs have found that diverse casting and non-stereotypical portrayals contribute to greater acceptance of others and reduced intergroup bias (Mares & Pan, 2013). Programs such as *Doc McStuffins* (2012) and *Paw Patrol* (2013) have been praised for presenting authentic cultural narratives that normalize racial and gender diversity while modeling prosocial behavior (Rogers et al., 2021). Similarly, the inclusion of characters with disabilities or neurodiversity, such as Julia (a character notable for being autistic) on *Sesame Street* (1969), has been shown to improve understanding and reduce stigma among preschool audiences (Anthony et al., 2020). These examples underscore the importance of intentional representation that reflects the complexity of real-world diversity, helping all children build inclusive mindsets from an early age. Diversity allows children to explore topics that might not have been explored otherwise, such as cultural perspectives, language, and certain subjects (Osgood et al., 2019; Mares & Pan, 2013). Thus, intentional representation exposes children to the possibility of learning diverse content that they would not have otherwise known about without media consumption.

Similarly, media initiatives such as the Media Initiative for Children in Northern Ireland (MIFC-NI) have demonstrated how intentional programming can help children recognize and address exclusion based on disabilities, race, and culture in conflict-affected areas (Connolly et

al., 2006). For example, the inclusion of a character with an eye patch, Chinese characters (as the Chinese population is the largest minority ethnic group in Northern Ireland), and two characters wearing the jerseys of Rangers and Celtic soccer teams (which are historically and culturally linked to the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland) across three episodes illustrates how the initiative addressed each issue effectively (Connolly et al., 2006).

Understanding how media creators incorporate such elements into shows can help us identify which strategies are being used and how to implement them more effectively.

### **Two Successful Examples of Effective Prosocial Media**

While the cultural and media environment has shifted dramatically since the 1970s, the foundational methodologies for teaching SEL through television were established by two pioneering programs: *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968) and *Sesame Street* (1969). These shows did more than just entertain; they established the best practices for educational media that persist today. Echoes of their approach are evident in the contemporary content reviewed for this study, notably in *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) and *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019). Both were created by Angela Santomero, who intentionally embraced Fred Rogers' signature techniques, specifically his use of "direct address" and slower pacing, to promote social emotional competence in a new generation of viewers. Examining these historical models provides the necessary context for understanding the structural elements that define high-quality SEL media (Santomero & Reber, 2018).

*Mister Rogers Neighborhood* (1968), created by Fred Rogers, was among the first children's television series focused on helping children better understand themselves (Sharapan, 2012). Coates et al. (1976) showed a positive influence on preschoolers' prosocial behaviors and

social interactions after watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968) and *Sesame Street* (1969). Fred Rogers introduced many methods to build and develop content for children based on their ability to ask questions and learn, like using the K-W-L (Know-Want-Learn) method to see what children want to know and how programs can develop content (Sharapan, 2012). Fred Rogers was a pioneer in integrating child development techniques into children's television. Rogers was the first person to bring child development experts as consultants for his show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968). He wanted to use an educational strategy to guide children through the process of learning and retaining new information. His strategy consists of three steps: (1) identifying what they already know about the topic, (2) listing questions they may have regarding the topic, and (3) exploring the topic to answer these questions. It turned out that his strategy was effective, and his show had a positive influence on children's SEL development. Coates et al. (1976) tested children on the effect of watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968), and they found a significant difference in positive reinforcement after four days (the test duration) from baseline to the treatment phase and baseline to the post-test phase. The results from the treatment to the post-test were not significant. Moreover, their study showed a significant increase in the children's giving of both positive reinforcement and punishment to other children in preschool from the baseline to the treatment phase and from the baseline to the post-test phase. Many other studies have also examined the effects of this show on children and different age groups and found positive results (Friedrich-Lynette et al., 1979; Kearney & Levine, 2019; Singer & Singer, 1976; Zimmerman & Christakis, 2007).

The second famous show, which began airing in 1969 and has been shown in over 120 countries across the world, is *Sesame Street* (1969) (Kearney & Levine, 2019). SEL is predominantly an important topic in *Sesame Street* (1969). The production team uses various

methods to promote SEL in the show. Social development became even more central to *Sesame Street* (1969) in its third season when the in-house production and research teams undertook a major effort to redefine the series' definition of social behavior, and place a stronger emphasis on this curriculum area, particularly in the area of cooperation (Fisch et al., 1999).

At an early stage, the *Sesame Street* (1969) team understood the need for substantial and ongoing participation from experts in education and early childhood development. This understanding resulted in the creation of what would later be known as the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) Model. This model was an interdisciplinary method of television production that united content experts, television producers, and educational researchers to work together throughout the project's lifespan (Fisch et al., 1999). Interestingly, research reveals that *Sesame Street* (1969) producers were addressing almost 70 distinct goals, as demonstrated by the comprehensive list of the show's primary objectives (Ball and Bogatz, 1970). One of the main goals of this show was the broad term of school readiness and educational attributes (Zero to Three) National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, 1992). Many studies after the show aired started to examine the impact of the show on children.

For example, Wright and Huston (1995) showed that preschool children who watched educational programs, especially *Sesame Street* (1969), were more eager to read books and participate in educational activities. Furthermore, these children performed significantly better than their peers on age-appropriate standardized tests, demonstrating superior letter-word knowledge, mathematics skills, vocabulary size, and school readiness. One study tested more than 1,000 children aged 3 to 5 and exposed them to different levels of the *Sesame Street* (1969) show and it was evident that those children who watched more *Sesame Street* (1969) showed significant gains in many areas, with the targeted area having the most gain (Ball & Bogatz,

1970). A meta-analysis by Mares and Pan (2013) showed that *Sesame Street (1969)* had a significant impact on children in three main categories: (1) cognitive outcomes, (2) cultural knowledge, and (3) social attitudes-reasoning, which are can be essential parts of SEL. Another study on the social behavior impact of *Sesame Street (1969)*, Paulson (1974) examined 78 preschoolers from disadvantaged communities. The author focused on cooperative behaviors and measured these behaviors through tests for both viewers and non-viewers. The results showed a significant increase in cooperative behaviors among children who watched *Sesame Street (1969)*. Zielinska and Chambers (1995) demonstrated a significant difference between those who watched prosocial versus neutral segments of *Sesame Street (1969)*. They observed several prosocial behaviors, such as positive interaction, turn-taking, helping, giving and sharing, cooperation, comforting, and affection.

In 1979, Bankart and Anderson discovered that watching thirty-minute videotapes of prosocial segments from *Sesame Street (1969)*, led to a reduction in both physical and verbal aggressive behavior during free-play sessions later that same day. In another study, Zielinska and Chambers (1995) examined 150 children and found that prosocial behaviors, such as positive interaction, cooperation, helping, giving, sharing, turn-taking, comforting, and affection, increased during free-play after watching a show that included prosocial segments.

To summarize, prosocial media can significantly impact children's social and emotional skills through their content. By thoughtfully integrating themes of empathy, problem-solving, and emotional regulation into engaging narratives, they provide children with valuable models for understanding and managing emotions, building positive relationships, and making responsible decisions. Theories such as the Capacity Model, along with research on educational programs like *Sesame Street (1969)*, and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood (1968)*, highlight the

importance of carefully balancing narrative and educational content to maximize comprehension and learning. As children increasingly interact with media, it becomes necessary to examine the specific messages embedded within the content they consume. Therefore, this research focuses on identifying and analyzing the presence of SEL themes within selected contemporary programming, by evaluating how these existing narratives model social and emotional competence.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a content analysis to examine how selected television programs for young children conveyed social and emotional learning through storytelling, characters, and narrative design. The analysis focused on identifying recurring SEL themes, diversity, inclusion, representation, narrative strategies, and formal features across the selected children's television programs.

### **Sample Selection**

The sample included eight television shows widely recognized for their focus on SEL learning or shows that are focused on children learning with embedded SEL messages, targeted toward children between the ages of 2 and 8 years old. The selection criteria were based on the programs' educational reputation, viewership among young children, and recognition by a credible media organization named Common Sense Media. To ensure objectivity and reduce selection bias, three episodes from each series were randomly selected using a random number generator, resulting in a total sample of twenty-four episodes for analysis.

Table 1 provides an overview of the selected programs, including their premise and their primary alignment with SEL competencies. For a comprehensive description of each show's production history, reviews, and a detailed synopsis of the plot and description for every analyzed episode, please refer to Appendix A.

Table 1. Summary of the selected show and their chosen episodes

<b>Program</b>	<b>Years Aired</b>	<b>Target Age</b>	<b>Premise &amp; SEL Focus</b>	<b>Selected Episodes</b>
<i>Handy Manny</i>	2006–2013	3–5	A bilingual handyman helps neighbors. Focuses on community, cooperation, and diversity.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have a Handy New Year</li> <li>2. Rusty's Little Light Lie</li> <li>3. Chico Goes to Preschool</li> </ol>
<i>Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood</i>	2012–Pres.	2–4	A modern-day spinoff of <i>Mister Rogers' Neighborhood</i> . Uses musical jingles to teach emotional regulation and self-management.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Daniel's New Friend Max</li> <li>2. What Friends Like</li> <li>3. Jodi's Asthma</li> </ol>
<i>Doc McStuffins</i>	2012–2020	2–5	A girl heals toys in her clinic. Focuses on empathy, caretaking, and health anxiety.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Night Night, Lala</li> <li>2. Cece's First Bath</li> <li>3. The Big Sleepover</li> </ol>
<i>Bluey</i>	2018–Pres.	5–7	A dog family engages in imaginative play. Focuses on family relationships and social play.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Camping</li> <li>2. Duck Cake</li> <li>3. Road Trip</li> </ol>
<i>Blue's Clues &amp; You!</i>	2019–Pres.	2–5	Interactive puzzle-solving. Focuses on curiosity, confidence, and cognitive steps.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sad Day with Blue</li> <li>2. Hide and Seek with Blue</li> <li>3. Blue's Bistro</li> </ol>
<i>Work It Out Wombats!</i>	2023–Pres.	3–6	Wombat siblings solve problems. Focuses on computational thinking and collaboration.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Sleepover</li> <li>2. Snout and About</li> <li>3. The Big Loud Storm</li> </ol>
<i>Lyla in the Loop</i>	2024–Pres.	4–8	A girl uses critical and computational thinking to solve daily issues. Focuses on persistence and trial-and-error.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How the Cookie Crumbled</li> <li>2. Lemonade Champs</li> <li>3. Carnival for Luke</li> </ol>
<i>Carl the Collector</i>	2024–Pres.	4–8	Features a protagonist on the autism spectrum. Focuses on neurodiversity and social-awareness.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Plushie Collection</li> <li>2. The Fall</li> <li>3. A Collection to Get Rid of</li> </ol>

## **Coding Categories**

Prior to the analysis, coding categories were established to guide the systematic examination of SEL themes. These categories were based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003), which identifies five core components of SEL:

- Self-awareness – recognizing one’s emotions, values, and strengths.
- Self-management – regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively.
- Social awareness – understanding and empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds.
- Relationship skills – forming and maintaining positive relationships.
- Responsible decision-making – making ethical and constructive choices about personal and social behavior.

In addition to these five core SEL components, three supplemental coding dimensions were developed for this study: (1) diversity, inclusion, and representation themes (addressing representation, cultural sensitivity, and equity), (2) narrative strategies (including who is providing the SEL message) and (3) formal features (production techniques, e.g, live action vs. animation). The full operationalized coding scheme, including detailed indicators for each category, is presented in Appendix B.

## **Coding Procedure and Reliability**

To ensure the validity and reliability of the coding process, an inter-coder reliability process was conducted prior to the primary data analysis. The coding panel consisted of four

individuals: the primary researcher and three volunteer graduate students, all of whom have background knowledge in children's media and educational research. A pilot study was conducted using a sample of nine episodes selected from *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), *Bluey* (2018) and *Carl the Collector* (2024). These episodes were not included in the final study sample, ensuring that the reliability training did not influence the final data analysis. I provided the initial operational definitions for the SEL themes based on the CASEL framework.

All four coders independently viewed the nine pilot episodes. To measure agreement, coders used a spreadsheet to record the timestamps of specific segments where they identified SEL themes. The panel met weekly to compare these timestamps and discuss their coding decisions. The comparison revealed a high degree of alignment, with all four coders consistently identifying themes at similar timestamps. These discussions allowed the group to clarify the boundaries of the themes and refine the definitions to make sure that all coders were interpreting the visual and verbal cues in the shows consistently. Following the pilot phase, once the coded definitions were finalized and we agreed, I independently coded the final sample of twenty-four episodes.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The analysis involved watching each selected episode in full to identify and categorize both verbal and nonverbal cues representing SEL competencies and additional three themes. This included recording key segments that explicitly addressed themes such as recognizing emotions, adapting behavior, problem-solving and helping others (all characteristic of SEL themes). Specific attention was paid to narrative context, including observing actions (e.g., helping a friend, resolving conflicts) and dialogue.

## Chapter 4: Results

During the data collection process, several trends became obvious. The most significant findings emerged from themes illustrating how characters demonstrated core SEL competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In addition, I will present results related to diversity, inclusion, and representation. I also found narrative techniques and formal features that supported the themes of SEL. The results are presented thematically, supported by episode examples and character dialogue drawn from the shows.

### Self-Awareness

Across the shows, seven of the eight programs portrayed self-awareness as a foundational component of SEL. Consistent with early childhood SEL frameworks, episodes focused on recognizing emotions, identifying internal states in response to new or stressful situations, awareness of preferences, boundaries, and comfort levels, and interpreting emotional and behavioral responses. The content analysis revealed three sub-themes of self-awareness that illustrate how children's media uses storytelling and character choices to depict early self-awareness.

### Recognizing Emotions

A pattern across the programs involved characters identifying and naming their emotions, even when they did not fully understand the reasons behind those feelings. This kind of apparent emotional recognition serves as an early building block for self-awareness, as children learn that emotions can be acknowledged even before they can be fully explained. For example, in *Daniel*

*Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), emotional labeling is built directly into the narrative structure. This is evident in "What Friends Like" (Season 7, Episode 2), where Daniel expresses disappointment and confusion through both dialogue and body language. When Daniel and Prince Wednesday exchange playful nicknames such as "firefighter" and "bus driver Danny", Daniel responds by talking to himself, "bus driver Danny", and then looks at the audience to say, "I don't like that name." He then asserts, "I'm Daniel not Danny." Daniel's visible upset expressions, combined with his direct verbalization to himself and the camera, illustrates the show's educational strategy, modeling how children can pause, notice a feeling, and articulate discomfort.

Other programs relied more on narrative context or subtle cues to guide emotional recognition. In *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023), "The Sleepover" (Season 1, Episode 9), Zeke anticipates his first sleepover with concern, especially when comparing his brother's past experiences to his own expectations. When Zeke says, "you didn't sleep in a hammock," his worried expression because he normally sleeps in a hammock at home, reinforces the idea that recognizing discomfort can help children anticipate and prepare for new situations. Similarly, *Doc McStuffins* (2012) frequently uses dialogue to name feelings clearly. In "Night Night, Lala" (Season 3, Episode 26), Lala shares, "It's hard being new when everyone else knows stuff," modeling how children can put words to feelings of nervousness or social uncertainty.

Some shows communicated emotional recognition through more implicit techniques. *Bluey* (2018) in the episode "Camping" (Season 1, Episode 43) uses various tone, silence, and reflective pauses to try to convey Bluey's sadness when Jean-Luc leaves without saying goodbye. Bluey asks her mother where her friend went, she learns that he left earlier in the

morning, and she then quietly revisits the spot where they planted the tree and used to play before Bluey starts crying. The scene demonstrates that emotional recognition can be shown through behavior rather than explicit dialogue. *Carl the Collector (2024)* similarly depicts early emotional awareness through internal questioning. Carl has Autism Spectrum Disorder, and reflects the way some autistic children may pause to understand an emotion before they can name it or respond to it. When Nico falls (Season 1, Episode 13), Carl appears confused and wonders, “What am I feeling?” highlighting uncertainty common in early childhood. Later, he says, “Nico is hurt, what do I do?” The scene presents emotional recognition as a process of figuring out both the feeling and the appropriate action. In Carl’s case, the show portrays emotion as something he works through internally, showing a thoughtful and supportive model of how children can make sense of feelings in their own way.

### ***Identifying Internal States in Response to New or Stressful Situations***

Recognizing emotions also occurred when characters encountered situations that were new, uncertain, or stressful, and the shows portrayed this through what the characters said, how they moved, and how they reacted. The emphasis in these scenes was on what the characters noticed within themselves at the moment, rather than on labeling emotions directly.

In *Handy Manny (2006)*, “Chico Goes to Preschool” (Season 3, Episode 14), Lola, Manny's sister, calls Manny explaining that Chico is nervous because they are leaving for the first day of preschool soon. When Manny brings a preschool surprise, a lunch box, Chico responds with worry in his eyes, saying “no preschool.” Manny asks if Chico is okay, and Lola responds, “No he doesn’t want to go to preschool.” Later, when Manny and the tools visit Chico’s house, Chico again says, “No preschool,” and he steps back from the adults as they talk

to him. These actions, such as backing away and repeating the same phrase, suggest that Chico is aware something feels off to him, even if he is not sure why. His reactions show the program's focus on the moment of noticing discomfort rather than verbalizing it.

Other programs used different strategies to convey this same idea of internal awareness occurring during new or stressful experiences. In *Doc McStuffins* (2012), "Cece's First Bath" (Season 4, Episode 7), Cece reacts strongly to her first bath. When Doc dips her feet into the water, Cece immediately starts crying, and she continues crying when Doc tries again. The show uses Cece's crying and physical reactions to indicate that she senses something about the situation that feels unpleasant or unfamiliar. The scene presents internal awareness through behavior alone, since Cece cannot verbalize what she is feeling because she is a baby. Although this example focuses on a much younger character than Chico, both scenes illustrate moments when characters recognize that an internal state has surfaced, even without naming the emotion directly.

In *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023), "The Sleepover" (Season 1, Episode 9), Zeke realizes that his friend's bedtime routine is very different from his own. When he says, "It's all just too different, I want to go home," it becomes clear that he is paying attention to how the unfamiliar routine affects him. His verbal reaction shows that he is recognizing his internal state at the moment it arises, especially as he compares what he expected with what is happening to an adult.

A more subtle version of this appears in *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), "How the Cookie Crumbled" (Season 1, Episode 9). Lyla becomes aware of frustration and disappointment when the last cookie is eaten and she needs ingredients to make more. Although the episode does not name her emotion, her tone, facial expressions, and comments such as "I am the snack monitor"

(she needs to bring the snacks for the next day to school), indicate she is reacting to the unexpected problem. When her mother says, “Sorry Lyla, I cannot go to the store right now,” Lyla’s face changes, and she seems to recognize that the situation is more challenging than she expected. Her shift in expression and urgency show the moment she becomes aware of how the situation affects her internally. While Zeke verbalizes his internal state directly, Lyla’s awareness is conveyed through changes in her demeanor, adding another way that the shows portray internal recognition.

### *Awareness of Preferences, Boundaries, and Comfort Levels*

In addition to emotional recognition, the analysis identified a second dimension of self-awareness involving characters’ understanding of their preferences, comfort needs, and personal limits. Across the shows, this type of awareness mainly emerged when characters made decisions based on what felt manageable, safe, or appropriate to them in the moment. These scenes focused on how characters assessed their own comfort levels and responded in ways that aligned with their needs.

In *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* (2012), “Daniel’s New Friend Max” (Season 5, Episode 14), Teacher Harriet brings her nephew Max to class, and the children greet him by each saying “Hello.” at the same time. Max covers his ears because the noise is bothering him. Teacher Harriet talks to the class and says, “That's too loud for Max,” and she asks if someone can get the blanket to put over Max to make him more comfortable. She also mentions that Max is autistic, “Which means that something about him is different than you.” Daniel becomes aware that Max engages with the world differently, prompting him to recognize that individuals have varying sensory and social comfort levels. The scene uses Max’s reaction and Teacher Harriet’s

explanation to show how comfort preferences can differ and how classmates can respond respectfully to those needs.

A more internally focused example appears in *Bluey* (2018), “Duck Cake” (Season 2, Episode 43). Bluey gradually notices her shifting motivation, moving from reluctance to a sense of responsibility. She talks about why she should do jobs and help, reflecting on what feels appropriate in the moment. At first, Bluey does not want to clean up her little sister’s mess, but after seeing her dad needing help, she reassesses what she is comfortable with and chooses to help him. This transition shows Bluey paying attention to her internal preferences and adjusting them when the situation changes.

In *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023), “Snout and About” (Season 1, Episode 1), Zeke’s attachment to Snout reveals his awareness of what helps him feel steady and secure. Zadie, Zeke’s older brother, mentions that “Snout is Zeke's best friend,” and Snout appears whenever Zeke needs comfort. The episode shows that Zeke recognizes what supports his sense of stability, and his comfort level becomes most visible when Snout is nearby. The show uses this bond to illustrate how a familiar object can play a role in how a character manages their boundaries and emotional safety.

A similar pattern appears in *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), “How the Cookie Crumbled” (Season 1, Episode 9). Lyla recognizes when a task feels too difficult or when she is not ready to continue, identifying her personal thresholds in a problem-solving context. Lyla and her sisters go to the grocery store with only ten minutes before closing. When Miss Emmaline, an elderly woman in a motorized shopping cart asks for help, Lyla says “yes” with hesitation, but once she realizes that one of the items matches what she needs, she tells Stu “to get one coconut for Miss

Emmaline and one for us.” She becomes more comfortable helping because the request aligns with her immediate goal, showing how her comfort level shifts based on what will satisfy her own needs.

Finally, in *Carl the Collector* (2024), “A Collection to Get Rid Of” (Season 1, Episode 14), characters identify which environments and organizational arrangements feel manageable for them. Carl loves collecting things, and he and his friends decide to clean the park and start collecting trash. Their decisions about how to sort and manage the items reflect an awareness of what feels orderly and comfortable for them. The episode presents comfort, as something that they collectively decided to do together for the greater good of the community emerges from routine and structure.

### ***Interpreting Emotional and Behavioral Responses***

My content analysis found moments where characters reflected on their emotions and behaviors after events occurred, indicating a more thought out form of self- awareness. Rather than focusing on in the moment feelings, several episodes portrayed characters looking back on past reactions and trying to understand them more clearly. These scenes showed characters making sense of how they felt, why they behaved a certain way, or what a situation meant to them after it had already passed.

One example of this reflective process appears in *Bluey* (2018), “Camping” (Season 1, Episode 43). Bluey reflects on her short lived friendship with Jean-Luc. She asks her mother, “Mom, why did Jean-Luc have to go,” trying to seek a better understanding of her own emotional response. When Bluey adds “he was my friend” and her mom explains that sometimes people come and go, Bluey responds with “but that's sad.” Her comments show that she is trying

to interpret the emotions she felt about Jean-Luc leaving and to understand why his departure affected her so deeply. The scene presents reflection as a way for Bluey to connect her sadness to the experience of forming and losing a friendship.

A similar reflective pattern can be seen in *Carl the Collector* (2024), “The Fall” (Season 1, Episode 13). Carl revisits the moment he froze when Nico fell, saying “Nico is hurt, what do I do?”, and notices that his response differed from Arugula’s, who was also on the scene. By thinking back on the moment, Carl tries to interpret what happened and how he reacted. This example, like Bluey’s, focuses on a character examining their earlier behavior and trying to make sense of an internal response that was not fully understood at the time.

Reflection also plays a central role in *Handy Manny* (2006), “Rusty’s Little Light Lie” (Season 1, Episode 6). Rusty reflects on the consequences of his earlier lie and becomes aware of the guilt that followed. Rusty pulls Manny aside and tells him, “I did it, I lied, I was not careful,” then adds, “I am a really bad tool,” before apologizing. He later confesses to the Mayor, saying “I didn’t want to tell because I didn’t want to get in trouble,” and tells both the Mayor and Manny that he should have never lied. In this scene, Rusty looks back on his actions and recognizes how his choices influenced how he felt afterward, showing another way characters interpret their own emotional and behavioral responses. Taken together, these scenes indicate that the shows frequently show characters drawing connections between past reactions and their present understanding, portraying reflection as an important part of how they come to know their own emotions and behaviors.

## **Self-Management**

The analysis showed self-management when characters used behaviors that helped them regulate emotions, adjust their behaviors, or kept trying when circumstances became difficult. Findings showed that seven of the eight programs included representations of self-management, though the frequency and depth of these behaviors varied across shows. Consistent with early childhood SEL frameworks, self-management was reflected through characters' efforts to regulate emotions, cope with challenges, adjust behavior, and rely on routines. The content analysis identified four sub-themes: coping strategies, calming down, adapting behavior, and routines supporting regulation. While no show demonstrated all four forms of self-management, most displayed at least one or two components. *Blue's Clues & You! (2019)* was the only series in the dataset where it was difficult to track codable instances of independent self-management, as characters relied primarily on adult support rather than regulating emotions or behavior on their own.

## ***Coping Strategies***

The content analysis found that four of the eight programs: *Handy Manny (2006)*, *Doc McStuffins (2012)*, *Work It Out Wombats! (2023)*, and *Lyla in the Loop (2024)*, included coping strategies that characters used to manage complex types of feelings. These strategies appeared when characters faced fear, anger, confusion, or nervousness and needed tools to regain emotional balance. Coping techniques often included breathing, seeking reassurance, using comfort objects, breaking tasks into steps, or temporarily withdrawing to a quiet place. Although some strategies were introduced by adults or peers, characters often applied them independently, which demonstrated early self directed regulation.

Coping strategies were strongly represented in *Doc McStuffins* (2012), where characters faced fear or nervousness during new routines. In “Night Night, Lala” (Season 3, Episode 26), Lala copes with bedtime anxiety by asking for predictability, repeatedly checking “what happens next?” in order to feel secure. As Doc breaks the routine into small, manageable steps, Lala uses procedural reassurance as a coping tool. Her body language, standing closer to Doc, relaxing her shoulders, and reducing her questions, signals that the structure itself helps her regulate emotions. In “Cece’s First Bath” (Season 4, Episode 7), Cece copes with fear by observing first, touching the water with one foot, and retreating briefly before trying again. Also, verbal support from Doc (“It’s okay, we’re right here”) further aids Cece’s coping, helping her regain confidence before entering the bath.

In *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023), “The Big Loud Storm” (Season 2, Episode 1), Zeke uses sensory coping strategies to manage fear. When the storm becomes overwhelming, he runs to a small enclosed space, holds Snout tightly, and curls his body inward. These actions reflect self-soothing behaviors. Although Malik and Zadie try to help with supportive tools, like earmuffs, padding the door, and offering gentle reassurance, Zeke independently initiates key coping behaviors, such as grabbing his comfort object and choosing a quiet, contained space.

In *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), “How the Cookie Crumbled” (Season 1, Episode 9), Lyla demonstrates coping strategies when a missing ingredient disrupts her baking plans. Rather than remaining overwhelmed, she pauses, verbalizes her frustration, and engages in self-talk to think through alternative solutions with her sisters. This form of coping, momentarily stepping back, reassessing the situation, and reframing the challenge, is aligned with components of SEL that help children persist through unexpected problems. While less physical than Zeke’s sensory

coping or Lala's routine-based coping, Lyla's strategy reflects higher-level emotional management through flexible thinking.

Lastly, *Handy Manny (2006)* included a subtle coping strategy connected to emotional discomfort. In "Chico Goes to Preschool" (Season 3, Episode 13), Chico copes with separation anxiety by holding onto familiar objects (lunchbox Manny gifted him), listening to Manny's reassurance, and slowly warming up once he sees his new cubby to put his lunchbox in. While supported, Chico's behavior shows early attempts to handle worry in a new environment.

### ***Calming Down***

Calming down appeared in four of the eight programs, though each show approached emotional de-escalation differently. Rather than portraying calm as an instantaneous shift, these episodes showed characters gradually settling their bodies and emotions in ways shaped by the situation, the environment, and support from others. The shows illustrated a range of calming processes, from sensory to attentional shifting to steadying routines, which together demonstrate how emotional intensity is reduced in children's media. The analysis identified calming down as a recurring and developmentally meaningful behavior. The following examples show how four programs portray this process through their own emotional progression and supportive strategies.

In *Work It Out Wombats! (2023)*, "The Big Loud Storm" (Season 2, Episode 1), Zeke's calming unfolds slowly across the episode, beginning with high distress and ending in comfort. After hiding in the closet, he remains tightly curled and rigid until Malik and Zadie help make the environment better for him. As the thunder becomes less noisy and the space feels safer, Zeke's body gradually shifts from tense to loose, and he begins talking in a happier tone. The

episode shows calming down stemming from receiving sensory needs, comfort from familiar objects, and feeling supported by his siblings. This was not a single moment of regulation, Zeke settles through a layered process where small adjustments accumulate into emotional steadiness.

In *Handy Manny* (2006), “Have a Handy New Year” (Season 2, Episode 25), calming down is conveyed through the community's stressful environment as they prepare for New Year's Eve and Manny's calm presence. After a series of mishaps, the tools often escalate by talking fast, shouting, or panicking. Manny slows the pace of the interaction, taking a moment before responding and lowering his voice. As he does so, the tools begin matching Manny's tone and energy, shifting from frantic energy toward more composed behavior. As calm behavior emerges through modeling, the group tension increasingly is brought down in response to Manny's consistent manner.

In another example, *Bluey* (2018), “Road Trip” (Season 2, Episode 4), Bluey's path to calmness stems from her frustration and impatience because she does not have her tablet. At first, she fidgets, sighs, and expresses impatience. Over time, she redirects her energy into imaginative play, creating stories and ideas from the back seat of the car. As her attention shifts, her physical movements decrease, her posture relaxes, her tone softens, and she stops focusing on the discomfort of the long ride. This demonstrates emotional relief once the characters find a way to relax and enjoy the journey.

Similarly, *Doc McStuffins* (2012) represents calming down as a gradual and supported process. In “Cece's First Bath” (Season 4, Episode 7), Cece's transition from anxiety to comfort is supported through guidance and emotional reassurance from Doc and the animal characters. When she is first placed in the bathwater, Cece becomes immediately distressed; she startles,

cries loudly, stiffens her body, and tries to pull herself away from the water. Cece begins to feel comfortable when the animal toys model the bath for her, showing her that the water can be safe and not so scary. Doc stays close and uses a soft, steady tone to talk and sing to Cece through what is happening. Once Doc and the toys are done modeling what to expect, Cece is placed into the water and suddenly relaxes; her crying slows, her posture softens, and she begins to smile as if a weight was lifted off her shoulders.

### ***Adapting Behavior***

Four of the eight programs demonstrated self-management through adapting behavior. I observed that adapting behavior is a process in which characters adjust their actions, expectations, or social responses in order to navigate changing circumstances or the needs of others. These moments were illustrated when characters faced new information, unexpected challenges, or shifting social demands and responded by modifying what they were doing rather than becoming stuck or frustrated.

Adapting behavior appeared when characters adjusted their actions or expectations in response to shifting circumstances or social cues. In *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), “Carnival for Luke” (Season 1, Episode 4), adaptation was shown when Lyla and her siblings realized their original carnival ideas would not work; instead of insisting on the original plan, they modified the activities so the experience remained enjoyable and exciting for Luke. A similar pattern was shown in *Bluey* (2018), “Road Trip” (Season 2, Episode 41), where Bluey shifted her mindset from frustration to engagement by using imaginative play when her tablet entertainment options were unavailable. Rather than remaining upset that she did not get to play on her tablet, she adapted by finding a new way to participate in the long car ride.

Adaptation was also evident in *Carl the Collector* (2024), “The Fall” (Season 1, Episode 13), when Carl adjusted his social response after realizing that Nico interpreted his initial hesitation as not caring. Once Carl understood how his reaction affected Nico, Carl approached Nico to explain what had happened and repair the misunderstanding. This example shows adaptation as a form of self-management where characters recognize how their actions influence others and respond to the problem. In *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023), “Snout and About” (Season 1, Episode 1), the siblings adapted repeatedly as each step of Zeke’s bedtime routine showed new information. Instead of sticking to one approach, they shifted their actions to align with what the situation required, demonstrating flexible adjustment rather than fixed behavior.

### ***Routines***

In *Carl the Collector* (2024), the episode “The Fall” (Season 1, Episode 13), shows how routines support Carl’s self-management in moments that feel unfamiliar or overwhelming. When Nico falls at the park, the situation is completely outside Carl’s usual routine, and he freezes because he does not know how to respond. Rather, when Carl talks through what happened with his mother, she helps him make sense of why the moment felt so difficult and guides him in creating a simple script for what he can say when he sees Nico again. This gives Carl a predictable structure to rely on, which allows him to approach the situation with more clarity and confidence. In this way, Carl develops a new interpersonal routine, knowing what to say when a friend gets hurt, which becomes the support he needs to repair the misunderstanding and reconnect with Nico.

A second example comes from *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023) in the episode “The Sleepover” (Season 1, Episode 9). Zeke’s bedtime routine is important for helping him settle in

an unfamiliar environment. When Leiko's routine does not match his own, Zeke struggles to relax. When Zeke becomes visibly uncomfortable, Leiko helps by incorporating parts of Zeke's usual routine, such as giving him time to settle, using comforting items he relies on, singing the goodnight song, and following a predictable order that mirrors what he does at home.

Reintroducing these familiar steps helps Zeke relax, adjust emotionally, and participate in the sleepover. Routines are also subtle in *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023) in the episode "Snout and About" (Season 1, Episode 1), where Zeke's entire bedtime routine becomes the structure the siblings follow to locate Snout.

In these three programs, routines consistently functioned as a predictable framework that supported emotional regulation. Whether anchored in organization or bedtime rituals, routines provided stability, reduced uncertainty, and helped characters manage transitions that might otherwise feel overwhelming. In this analysis, routines emerged as a meaningful component of self-management for characters who depend on structure to feel secure and emotionally balanced.

### **Social Awareness**

Four of the eight programs demonstrated at least one clear component of social awareness across the coded episodes. Social awareness appeared across most of the programs in the data and was expressed through characters demonstrating empathy, understanding differences, and perspective-taking. In contrast to self-awareness, which centered on internal understanding, social awareness in these episodes reflected how characters made sense of others' experiences and adjusted their behavior to strengthen relationships.

### *Empathy*

A key finding of this analysis was that *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) presented empathy in a direct and interactive way, using its format to teach children how to notice and understand another character's feelings. In the episode "Sad Day with Blue" (Season 1, Episode 6), empathy is not only shown through Josh's support of Blue but through how he actively guides the viewer to practice empathy with him. When Blue moves slowly, lowers her ears, acts unresponsive, and seems down, Josh does not immediately explain what is wrong. Instead, he pauses, looks into the camera, and asks the audience to pay attention to specific clues. Josh uses gentle questions such as "What do you notice?" and "How do you think Blue feels right now?" to help viewers interpret these emotional cues. By thinking out loud and describing the signs he sees, Josh models how to analyze someone else's behavior to understand their feelings. When it becomes clear that Magenta accidentally knocked down Blue's block tower, Josh again involves the audience by asking how both friends might feel and what could help Blue feel better. *Blue's Clues & You!* is unique in that it involves the audience directly in the narrative of the storyline to practice these skills.

Similarly, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) guides the audience to feel empathy, presenting emotions in a way that helps children not just see what the characters feel but experience that empathy themselves. In "Jodi's Asthma" (Season 5, Episode 12), empathy is illustrated through Daniel and Katerina Kittykat's careful responses to Jodi's discomfort during their game of Splat Ball. As they play, Daniel and Katerina notice that Jodi is breathing heavily; she slows down, struggles to breathe, and steps away to use her inhaler. Rather than ignoring her distress, they stop the game and ask why she needs medication. Jodi's mom, Dr. Plat, then

explains asthma in simple terms, helping Daniel and Katerina understand what Jodi is experiencing. Once they gain this knowledge, both characters immediately shift their focus to keeping everyone included, singing the refrain, “We can find a way for everyone to play.” Daniel then suggests turning Splat Ball into a sitting down game so Jodi can join safely and comfortably. Later, when O the Owl arrives and asks to play, Daniel turns to the camera and invites the audience to participate, saying, “You can play too!” These episodes demonstrate that empathy involves recognizing another person’s emotional signals and then adjusting one’s behavior to help them feel comfortable, heard, or included. This kind of responsive adjustment overlaps with self-management, as managing one’s own actions is often motivated by understanding how those actions affect others.

Identifying emotional signals continues in *Bluey (2018)*, particularly in “Duck Cake” (Season 2, Episode 43), where empathy shows in a small but meaningful family moment. As Bluey watches her father sitting on the floor after the cake collapses, she notices his defeated posture and quiet frustration. Without needing an explanation, she understands that he is upset. This glance is enough for Bluey to recognize her father’s feelings and decide to step in and help, showing empathy by recognizing his disappointment. While not every *Bluey (2018)* storyline centers on empathy, this scene shows how the series uses visual cues and everyday interactions to portray a child responding empathetically without explicitly labeling or explaining the emotion.

### ***Understanding Differences and Perspective-Taking***

Five of the eight programs portrayed social awareness through moments when characters recognized that others experience situations differently and attempted to understand those

perspectives. Within this group, four shows demonstrated both understanding differences and perspective taking, while one program showed perspective taking without explicitly showing the differences.

*Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (2012)* showed the most detailed portrayals of both understanding differences and perspective taking. In "Daniel's New Friend Max" (Season 5, Episode 14), the episode introduces Max during circle time, where the children excitedly greet him. When Max immediately covers his ears and looks uncomfortable, Teacher Harriet responds by explaining the individual differences that someone with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) faces. She explains, "Everyone is different," and uses a song, "When a friend needs different things than you, there are some things you can do", to help the class understand Max's sensory needs. This framing sets the foundation for Daniel's later efforts to interpret the situation from Max's perspective.

As Daniel approaches Max to play, he notices that Max prefers to play by himself. Teacher Harriet repeats the same guiding song, prompting Daniel to think intentionally about how Max engages with the world. Daniel begins to sing along, using the lyrics to reason through what Max enjoys: Max likes playing with buses, while Daniel likes building other structures. Daniel decides to join Max's activity rather than expecting Max to join his. This moment reflects Daniel's growing ability to adjust his own preferences after considering what play looks like for Max. Later in the episode, Daniel accidentally makes a loud noise while playing, and Max again covers his ears. Daniel quickly stops and changes his behavior, demonstrating not only recognition of Max's sensory sensitivity but also active perspective taking when he understands that the noise feels overwhelming for Max, even though it does not bother Daniel. This moment

transitions into Daniel's internal reflection, where he visualizes how Max experiences play. Daniel sings, "I can play quieter and that's okay," and "He likes to have fun in his own way." This illustrates Daniel's growing ability to integrate an understanding of Max's sensory profile into his own choices. By the end of the episode, Daniel's willingness to shift his approach demonstrates a core aspect of social-awareness: understanding how someone else perceives a situation and responding in a way that supports their emotional and sensory well-being.

While *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) presents understanding differences through clear verbal reflection, guided songs, and direct conversations about sensory needs, *Bluey* (2018) communicates the same SEL ideas in a much more subtle way. Instead of using adult narration or explicit dialogue to help characters make sense of one another, *Bluey* shows perspective taking through visual cues, shared actions, and quiet moments of understanding. There is some verbal communication between the characters, but in this episode, the social awareness comes mainly from how Bluey notices and responds to what Jean-Luc does. In *Bluey* (2018), the episode "Camping" (Season 1, Episode 43) illustrates understanding differences and perspective taking through a connection built in the absence of shared verbal language, where the two children learn to understand each other through gestures, emotional cues, and coordinated play. Although Bluey speaks English and Jean-Luc speaks French, they form a genuine friendship by reading each other's actions and intentions rather than relying on words. When Bluey collects sticks to build a "house," Jean-Luc approaches, speaks to her in French, and hands her extra sticks. Their wagging tails show a shared excitement, signaling that both children recognize friendly intent even without understanding each other's speech. As Jean-Luc gestures toward the leaves to suggest adding walls, Bluey responds with enthusiasm, interpreting his meaning

through nonverbal cues. This early moment captures perspective taking, as Bluey infers Jean-Luc's ideas and adapts her play to include them.

Their play extends as Jean-Luc lifts a seed, gestures toward it, and communicates his excitement about planting it. Bluey immediately understands and runs with him to plant the seed, another example of her interpreting his intentions through tone, movement, and shared energy. Over the next several days, Bluey and Jean-Luc continue to look for each other, checking on their growing plant and engaging in play that depends on synchronized actions rather than shared language. Their ability to maintain a friendship through gestures, mutual excitement, and attentive observation illustrates understanding differences; Bluey recognizes that Jean-Luc communicates differently but is still able to connect with him deeply through play and emotional expression. Jean-Luc, in turn, pays attention to Bluey's reactions, showing awareness of her perspective through cooperative gestures and responsive engagement. The episode models perspective taking as an active process of noticing how another child expresses ideas and feelings, showing that children can make sense of communication differences through careful observation, shared engagement, and attunement rather than spoken language.

The theme of understanding differences is further shown in *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023), which depicts social awareness through the emotional and sensory differences within sibling relationships. In "Snout and About" (Season 1, Episode 1), Zeke's distress over losing Snout reflects his reliance on predictable routines and attachment objects. Understanding differences and perspective taking become clear when Malik and Zadie immediately follow Zeke after seeing how upset he is. Malik and Zadie, who originally did not understand the severity of the situation, begin to realize how important Snout is when Zeke says, "Snout is Zeke's favorite

best stuffy in the whole world.” This moment shows the siblings beginning to understand that Zeke experiences this situation very differently than they do.

The older siblings then suggest that the best way to find Snout is by retracing Zeke’s bedtime routine, and they follow each step because they see how concerned Zeke is. During the bath step, a bubble looks like Snout, and Zeke’s eyes fill with tears. Zadi extends her hand to Zeke and says, “Don’t worry, we will help you find your Snout,” offering comfort while continuing to look. The takeaway is that the siblings put themselves in Zeke’s shoes to help him find Snout so he would not stay in distress. Their actions demonstrate both understanding differences, recognizing that Zeke’s emotional reaction is stronger and rooted in his attachment, and perspective-taking, as they guide their support based on how the situation feels to Zeke. This same pattern appears again in “The Big Loud Storm” (Season 2, Episode 1), where Zeke’s fear of thunder contrasts with his siblings’ calmness. As they observe Zeke covering his ears, Malik and Zadi begin to imagine how overwhelming the noise must feel to him and try different ways to comfort him.

Perspective taking and understanding differences are portrayed in depth in *Carl the Collector* (2024), where Carl’s experiences as a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) shape how he interprets social situations. The World Health Organization identifies ASD characteristics such as “some degree of difficulty with social interaction and communication” and “patterns of activities and behaviours” (World Health Organization, 2025). These traits are woven into the narrative of “The Fall” (Season 1, Episode 13), where Carl freezes after Nico falls while their other friends respond immediately. Nico’s initial confusion reflects her limited

understanding of Carl's processing style, while Carl's stillness shows how his ASD differences influence his ability to respond in fast-paced social moments.

The episode deepens its focus on perspective taking when Carl later tells his mother, "I think Nico is mad at me but I don't know why," and carefully recounts what happened. His statement, "I was really scared, I didn't know what to do," demonstrates Carl trying to understand Nico's feelings while also processing his own. When his mother explains that he needed more time "because his brain works differently," Carl's follow-up question, "Because I am autistic?" shows a child actively connecting his identity to the misunderstanding. When Carl practices a script to "talk it out," he is engaging in a structured form of perspective-taking. Later, at Nico's house, the scene shifts focus to how others interpret Carl's behavior. Nico expresses anger and confusion because she cannot make sense of why Carl "didn't act like a friend." Carl takes a deep breath and explains, "My brain works differently than some kids," offering a developmentally appropriate explanation of ASD. Nico responds that Carl's explanation helped her understand what happened, which demonstrates a reciprocal perspective shift. Their friends echo her reaction, saying, "I'm glad you told her." *Carl the Collector (2024)* models social awareness as the capacity to acknowledge differences in how children think, feel, and respond, demonstrating that recognizing individuality and taking another's perspective are central to navigating peer relationships.

Finally, in *Handy Manny (2006)*, "Have a Handy New Year" (Season 2, Episode 25), social awareness is demonstrated through perspective taking rather than understanding differences. After Mr. Lopart learns that his mother's flight has been canceled, his quieter tone and reduced enthusiasm signal a shift in how he is feeling. Manny notices these subtle emotional

cues and interprets them as disappointment, even though the rest of the community remains focused on preparing for the celebration. Instead of continuing with his own excitement, Manny considers what the situation might feel like from Mr. Lopart's point of view and adjusts his behavior accordingly. He invites Mr. Lopart to help with the decorations, offering involvement as a supportive response to his subdued mood. What is notable in this episode is that perspective taking is woven into an ordinary interaction rather than presented as a formal lesson.

### **Relationship Skills**

The analysis showed that all eight programs demonstrated at least one component of relationship skills across the coded episodes. Relationship skills appeared in both explicit and implicit forms, depending on the narrative structure of the show. In some episodes, characters directly modeled these skills through clear dialogue, guidance, or instructional moments, while in others, relationship skills were embedded more subtly within the storyline and character interactions. Four recurring aspects of relationship skills were identified: communication, problem-solving with others, repairing conflict, and teamwork.

### ***Communication***

Communication appeared in most cases and represented a key relationship skill. Across the eight programs, characters communicated emotions, needs, ideas, and solutions through dialogue, gestures, and guided conversations.

In *Carl the Collector (2024)*, communication is central to the emotional development of the story in "The Fall" (Season 1, Episode 13). After Carl freezes when Nico falls, he goes to Nico's home and says, "I need to ask you a question." Nico responds, "I don't want to talk to you," and Carl says, "I think you are mad at me, but I don't know what I did. Maybe you could

tell me.” Nico explains her perspective by saying, “Friends help friends that need help.” These exchanges show communication being used to express feelings, share expectations, and identify the cause of a misunderstanding. Carl leaves without fully understanding the issue, which leads him to communicate his confusion to his mother and seek clarity about what happened. His mother models supportive communication by telling him to “breathe and give Nico time to think about what you are saying and time to respond because this is new for both of you,” illustrating communication as a relational skill that involves slowing down and giving space for others to share their thoughts. When Carl approaches Nico again, their conversation becomes the foundation for understanding each other’s perspectives and resolving tension, showing how communication contributes directly to repairing and maintaining relationships.

Communication is also represented in “The Plushie Collection” (Season 1, Episode 10), where Carl faces a different type of challenge as he tries to organize his growing plushie collection. After struggling to sort the toys, Carl’s mother suggests that he might consider letting go of plushies he no longer uses. Carl takes this seriously and talks openly with Sheldon and Forrest, telling them he needs help because he “does not know how” to organize the collection on his own. By sharing what he is struggling with, Carl invites his friends to support him. Sheldon and Forrest come over, and the three of them work together to create a plan for organizing the plushies. Carl is also honest about his preferences. When Forrest asks to take the dog plushie, Carl says, “Sorry Forrest, you can’t have that one,” showing how communication can be used to set boundaries in a friendly and respectful way. These interactions show how communicating needs, limits, and requests can help characters collaborate and stay connected.

The episode models for children that asking for help, expressing confusion, and stating what feels comfortable are all important parts of developing supportive relationships.

In *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), communication appears in a more implicit form between siblings and parents. In “How the Cookie Crumbled” (Season 1, Episode 9), Lyla expresses her frustration during the baking process when she discovers her mother used all the flour for her own project. The sisters communicate to ask how they are going to solve the problem. Lyla's mother says, “Take a breath, we will think of something.” The mother responds by sitting down at the kitchen table, ensuring she is available for communication, offering reassurance, and preparing to use problem-solving strategies. Lyla and her family take turns speaking to resolve the issue of the missing ingredients. While the episode does include communication, it does not devote as much time to it as other programs, since the focus shifts quickly toward the family working together to solve the problem. Communication occurs briefly to guide the situation, but unlike *Carl the Collector* (2024), it is not repeated or explored in depth and mainly serves as a starting point for the problem-solving that follows.

In *Doc McStuffins* (2012), communication serves as the structural backbone of “The Big Sleepover” (Season 2, Episode 13). When Doc has to choose only two toys to bring to her first sleepover, she communicates her decision calmly and respectfully by saying, “I am sorry, I wish I could take everyone.” Her tone and wording model fairness and honesty, which helps maintain trust even in a disappointing situation. When Chilly, who is not selected, begins to panic and says, “What if I get sick?” Doc responds by asking, “Are you really sick?” This invites Chilly to clarify his feelings rather than react out of worry. Chilly then admits, “No, but what if I just miss you?” revealing the true emotion behind his initial fear. Doc responds with reassurance by giving

him a picture and explaining, “Whenever you miss me, you can look at this picture and always remember I’m near.” She then breaks into the song, “All You Have to Do When You Are Feeling Blue is Picture Me and You.” The interaction shows how Doc uses communication not only to explain her decision but also to help her toys identify and express their emotions. By remaining calm, checking in with Chilly, and offering both verbal and emotional reassurance, Doc models communication as a relationship skill that can reduce uncertainty, strengthen connection, and create an emotionally safe environment for others.

In *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* (2012), communication appears more frequently and more explicitly than in any other program coded in this dataset. Across all three episodes, communication happens through peer interactions, adult guidance, and direct engagement with the audience. The show is structured in a way that makes communication a central teaching tool; when a relational message is important, the characters often introduce it through a short song that repeats throughout the episode. Because the songs are catchy and used multiple times, the lesson becomes clearer and easier for young viewers to remember.

In “Daniel’s New Friend Max” (Season 5, Episode 14), communication is guided as part of the unfolding plot. The episode introduces Max, Teacher Harriet’s autistic nephew, and shows Daniel learning how to communicate in a way that works for Max. Teacher Harriet models communication directly by using simple phrases and prompting Daniel with guidance such as, “Maybe there is something the two of you can do together.” She then introduces the song, “When a friend needs different things than you, there are some things you can do,” which reinforces the idea that communication sometimes requires adjusting to another person’s needs. Daniel repeats this message through the song as he figures out how to interact with Max,

showing that communication is a process that develops through modeling, practice, and reflection.

The episode also includes peer communication. Daniel pays attention to the way Max prefers to engage, such as watching first before joining in, and Daniel responds by setting up blocks and allowing Max time to feel comfortable. Communication also extends to the viewers at home, as Daniel reassures the audience by saying, “Max does want to play with me,” demonstrating the social understanding he is building. At the very end of the episode, there is a full-length song dedicated to how Max likes to communicate: “Today I met a brand new friend, he likes to watch and see... when a friend needs different things there are some things you can do.” This extended version reinforces the episode’s relational message and emphasizes different ways communication can look depending on a friend’s needs. Across all three coded episodes, the pattern is consistent: adults guide the initial communication, peers communicate in responsive ways, and Daniel communicates outwardly to the audience. Through songs, adult guidance, and peer examples, the show consistently models relationship skills in ways that help children see what positive communication looks like in everyday situations.

*Blue’s Clues & You! (2019)* also draws attention to communication by inviting the audience into the clue-solving process. Josh models communication strategies, asking questions, interpreting nonverbal cues, and pausing to reflect, showing that communication facilitates both understanding and connection. The show uses the audience as a form of communication partner. In “Blue’s Bistro” (Season 3, Episode 3), Josh teaches the audience how to order food in a restaurant. The communication mostly occurs between Josh talking to the camera and using Blue’s paw print to guide the audience through the interactions. Josh acts as a waiter for Blue and

Magenta. When he is at the table about to take their order, Josh pauses and asks Blue what she wants, but he also directly talks to the audience, taking long pauses to allow the children at home to verbally respond and "place the order." This technique models the turn-taking nature of communication, validating the viewer's voice as part of the social interaction.

### ***Problem-solving and repairing conflicts***

Problem-solving and repairing conflict often appeared together across the programs and represented key components of relationship skills within SEL. I found that these scenes not only showed characters solving practical challenges but also demonstrated how children maintain social connection during difficult moments. Across the shows, problem-solving involved cooperation, flexibility, perspective-taking, and emotional responsiveness, all behaviors that align closely with SEL's definition of relationship skills. In many episodes, the characters did not focus solely on the problem itself, but on how their actions affected others and what they could do to preserve or strengthen the relationship while finding a solution. By doing this, the programs model early conflict resolution skills, showing children how listening, adapting, sharing responsibility, and addressing misunderstandings help maintain positive relationships.

Findings showed that in *Handy Manny (2006)*, problem-solving served as both the narrative structure and a model of relationship skills. The premise of the show relies on Manny and the tools solving problems and building together, which inherently strengthens social skills. In "Have a Handy New Year" (Season 2, Episode 25), Manny and the tools work together to help Mayor Rosa decorate and fix the ball for the New Year's ball drop. There are multiple problem-solving occurrences within the plot, ranging from decorating tasks to managing emotional distress.

When Mr. Lopart is sad because his mother cannot come to the celebration, Manny attempts to solve this emotional conflict by asking, “You know what might help?” He then suggests, “Helping Mayor Rosa and me for the celebration tonight.” Manny extends the offer to distract Mr. Lopart from his sadness, which represents the beginning stages of conflict resolution. Later in the episode, as they follow Mayor Rosa’s orders to see if the party preparations are running smoothly, they face setbacks. When checking on the food, Mr. Lopart accidentally drops all the snacks on the ground. The tools ask, “Can’t you make some more buñuelos, Mrs. Portillo?” Mrs. Portillo replies, “Si, it’s a lot of work, I hope I have enough time.” One of the tools then asks, “We can help, right, Manny?” Manny suggests, “Of course we can. While we are helping with the buñuelos, Mr. Lopart can check on the next task.” This creates a solution while also resolving the immediate conflict. By having Mr. Lopart handle the next task, they divide and conquer the smaller hurdles. Their collaborative problem-solving, calmly assessing what went wrong, sharing tasks, and encouraging one another, demonstrates how cooperation supports both the task and the relationship. Their willingness to include Mr. Lopart, even when his mistakes create more issues, reflects relational skills like patience, empathy, and helping others feel valued.

*Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood (2012)* uses a direct instructional approach to present SEL messages. Each episode features a song about a specific topic, emphasizing a problem-solving strategy that helps kids remember how to act, think, or speak in certain situations. The song is repeated throughout the episode, effectively reinforcing the message.

An example of this approach is “Jodi’s Asthma” (Season 5, Episode 12), which uses problem-solving to teach concepts like inclusion and empathy. Daniel and his friends experience

a moment of worry when they notice Jodi becoming tired and feeling left out during a game. When Daniel and Katerina Kittycat walk over to Jodi, Daniel learns what asthma is and identifies the problem: Jodi cannot run around and play Splat Ball. With the guidance of Jodi's mom, who says, "Maybe we can think of a way Jodi can still play," the episode moves into a problem-solving sequence. Jodi's mom starts to sing, "We can find a way for everyone to play," and Daniel and Katerina repeat the refrain. Daniel suggests they can play a different game. This idea of choosing a new activity that everyone can enjoy shows children that solving a problem in relationships often means adjusting expectations and paying attention to others' needs. By changing the activity instead of insisting on the original plan, the characters model relational skills such as perspective taking and cooperative decision-making, which are important when it comes to adapting to new experiences and growing relationships. The repetition of the song allows for the message to be delivered and supports healthy peer interactions.

In *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), problem-solving strengthens relationships through shared thinking, collaboration, and persistence. In "Lemonade Champs" (Season 1, Episode 6), the problem-solving begins when Lyla and Everett want to raise money for the animal shelter, Meow-Town. Everett says, "I need to think of a way to get money so I can help Meow-Town," and Lyla responds, "I know how to make money... We can make a lemonade stand." They work together to figure out the best-tasting lemonade, but while the first day is successful, the second day brings a setback when rain disrupts their stand. They use conversation to figure out the problem; Lyla says, "I don't get it, yesterday we ran out of lemonade," and Everett notes, "Today barely anyone wants lemonade."

Rather than misdirecting frustration at one another, they use logic and reasoning to find a solution. The series depicts the characters asking questions out loud and working through the problem together. For example, Everett explains what went wrong, and Lyla says, “Yesterday was sunny, so people wanted lemonade to cool off.” Everett replies, “Today it's cold and rainy so barely anybody wanted lemonade.” Lyla concludes, “We need to make more lemonade when it's hot out and less when it's cold out.” With the guidance of Lyla’s older sister, they follow a method that helps guide how to fix the problem, framing problem-solving as a collaborative process where each person contributes ideas. By showing siblings cooperating, the series models how collaborative problem-solving protects relationships and helps children navigate challenges together.

In *Carl the Collector* (2024), problem-solving and conflict repair come together in relationally meaningful ways. In “A Collection to Get Rid Of” (Season 1, Episode 14), the group discovers the park is filled with trash after a community event. Carl and his friends approach the problem when they realize they cannot play freely. Forrest accidentally trips on a soda can, and Carl responds, “It's actually not just one soda can... look at all this litter.” Nico adds, “There is a problem here Carl, this litter is such a bummer,” and Sheldon notes, “It's not so fun to be at a park when it looks like this.” Arugula suggests, “Hey! Maybe we can collect all this trash.” Although Carl initially remarks that “trash is a weird thing to collect,” Arugula explains it is a way to collect items to get rid of them, and they proceed to work together.

Their different approaches, such as Forrest wanting to race and Carl focusing on organizing, show how everyone has a task they are working through. Meanwhile, a band called The Ectotherms, who performed the day prior, return for a missing item and notice the kids

cleaning. They send a mass message to their fans to help clean up the mess and join Carl and his friends. The episode demonstrates problem-solving as a shared effort where the group finds a rhythm that accommodates each friend's style. When more neighbors come to help, the cleanup turns into a community effort that brings everyone closer. The ending highlights that small conflicts or environmental obstacles can be repaired simply by working side by side and appreciating what each person contributes.

### **Responsible Decision-Making**

Responsible decision-making appeared across programs through moments when characters evaluated situations, considered consequences, made thoughtful choices, or took initiative to help others. These decisions were often incorporated into everyday storylines, showing young viewers how choices affect oneself, peers, and the surrounding environment. The analysis identified three sub-themes of responsible decision-making: problem-solving, making choices, and weighing consequences and helping others (which sometimes overlapped). While the degree of emphasis varied across programs, most shows demonstrated that decision-making is a process shaped by self-awareness, understanding, and attention to others.

### ***Problem-Solving***

Problem-solving often appeared when characters encountered a challenge and used reasoning, planning, or collaboration to work toward a solution. Shows like *Doc McStuffins* (2012) modeled decision-making through structured steps, such as identifying the problem, diagnosing what is wrong, and choosing actions based on evidence.

In “Night Night, Lala” (Season 3, Episode 26), responsible decision-making becomes especially clear once Doc realizes that Lala’s behavior is connected to her uncertainty about how to be a crib toy for Maya, Doc’s baby sister. After Lala completes her check-up and begins to feel better physically, Doc and the toys shift toward understanding why Lala will not sleep in the crib. Doc asks, “Lala, I still need to know why you were dancing on the crib like that,” and Hallie adds, “It was dangerous, you could’ve fallen.” Doc follows by saying, “Or you could have fallen on the baby and hurt her,” prompting Lala to explain her intention: “I didn’t want to hurt baby, I was trying to get baby to stop crying.”

This conversation models how responsible decision-making for young viewers often involves understanding the impact of one’s actions, not just the actions themselves. Doc and the toys help Lala make sense of the situation and reflect on her choices, showing that decisions are shaped by both intentions and consequences. Their guidance continues through the encouraging song, “You’re doing great, you’re doing fine... a little practice, a little time you’ll get the job done right,” which reassures Lala that learning her new role takes time. Professor Hootsburgh adds to this supportive moment by reminding Lala that “the new baby needs all your love.” Lala then has a moment of realization, saying, “I will love her so much... I can’t wait until she says my name,” indicating that she now understands her responsibility as Maya’s crib toy. The episode ends with Lala smiling and settling next to Maya, showing that she has made a decision after processing guidance, reflecting on her intentions, and understanding her role. This moment shows how problem-solving and responsible decision-making grow through collaboration, emotional safety, and clear explanation.

*Work It Out Wombats!* (2023) also illustrates responsible decision-making through moments when characters evaluate a situation, consider how their choices affect others, and adjust their behavior with support. In “The Sleepover” (Season 1, Episode 9), responsible decision-making starts as Zeke struggles with the unfamiliar bedtime routine at Leiko’s house. Once Leiko says, “It can be hard doing something differently than you’re used to,” Zeke is crying but responds silently. Leiko comforts him by saying, “Your way reminds me that we should have a bedtime story,” and Zeke becomes a bit more comfortable and suggests a story.

This interaction supports the decision-making process because Zeke is learning how to share what he needs, and Leiko is responding in a way that helps him make a choice that feels manageable. The problem-solving is mutual: Leiko adjusts the routine, and Zeke considers whether these changes make it easier for him to stay. In the next scene, Leiko tells the bedtime story, and everyone falls asleep. Once the story ends, Leiko checks in and asks, “Zeke, you wanted to go home, should we call Grandma Super to come get you?” Zeke responds, “No, I can stay for a little,” and then falls asleep. This moment reflects a quiet but meaningful decision: Zeke evaluates how he feels after the group’s adjustments and chooses to remain at the sleepover. Rather than reacting from discomfort alone, he makes a decision based on the new supports in place and his own growing confidence. Zeke’s choice to stay is not framed as a requirement but as a decision he arrives at after feeling understood and supported.

### ***Making Choices***

Making choices appeared when characters selected an action based on their emotions, values, or understanding of a situation. These moments were shown through meaningful interactions that illustrated how everyday decisions reflect responsible thinking.

In *Bluey* (2018), “Road Trip” (Season 2, Episode 41) focuses on choice-making in a direct and accessible way. Bluey begins the journey frustrated and bored. Mom suggests, “Don’t worry, I know many non-computer games we can play,” but although Bingo and Bluey try playing I Spy, the non-tablet games feel boring to her. Mom then asks Bluey what she finds fun about computer games, and after Bluey describes a jumping game, Mom responds, “You don’t need computer games to play jumping, just use your fingers,” introducing imaginative play as an alternative. After discovering ways to cope with boredom through imaginative play, Bluey asks Mom for more games, and Mom responds, “I’m all out of games... sometimes you’re just going to be bored.” When Bluey asks, “What do I do about it?” Mom replies, “You just be bored.” Bluey takes this message in and reflects on it. When Bluey later finds the tablets she originally wanted, she pauses and evaluates the situation. Even though the tablets are now available, she chooses to continue playing with Bingo instead. This moment models responsible decision-making because her choice is not driven by immediate impulse, but by recognizing what feels meaningful and enjoyable in the moment.

In *Handy Manny* (2006), “Rusty’s Little Light Lie” (Season 1, Episode 6) illustrates a different form of choice-making. Rusty accidentally breaks the theater’s lightbulbs and initially hides the mistake out of embarrassment. As Manny examines each lightbulb, Rusty hides in a corner without saying anything. Manny suggests they tell Mayor Rosa about the broken lightbulbs. When the mayor asks, “What do I tell all the people coming for the grand opening?” Rusty shifts from his embarrassment to building the courage to tell Manny what happened; he chooses to tell the truth. His decision reflects personal responsibility, honesty, and courage. Rusty explains that he did not say anything earlier because he was afraid Manny would be upset.

He then confesses to the mayor, saying, “I lied because I thought I was going to get in trouble,” and the mayor responds with comfort rather than punishment. Rusty’s decision-making continues as he takes initiative to help fix the problem. He suggests that if everyone in the neighborhood donates a lightbulb, they will have enough to light the theater, and he takes the lead in asking people to borrow bulbs. Decision-making often involves repairing a mistake and taking action to make a situation right, even when doing so feels uncomfortable.

*Carl the Collector (2024)* characters frequently make decisions that are shaped by emotional awareness and reasoning. In “The Plushie Collection” (Season 1, Episode 1), Carl chooses which plushies to keep and which to donate. When his mother asks, “Do you want to do something about it,” referring to organizing or getting rid of some of his plushies, Carl begins to consider his options. She reminds him of their trip to the museum and explains that not all of the museum’s collection is on display, offering the idea that “museums can also give collections away.” This reasoning gives Carl a framework for understanding that organizing does not mean losing everything that matters.

Carl and his friends attempt different trial-and-error strategies to sort the plushies, but nothing works at first. When Carl’s mom offers support, he takes a polaroid photo of Forrest with the cheetah plushie and tells him, “You can keep it,” surprising his friends because Carl typically prefers to hold onto everything he collects. Carl follows this moment by saying, “I think I found out how to organize my plushies. If there is a name or a story, it stays,” showing that he has created a meaningful system that helps him decide what to keep. He becomes willing to part with plushies that do not hold personal significance, demonstrating a thoughtful decision shaped by reflection, reasoning, and conversation with others.

Carl's decisions stemmed from understanding his space, listening to guidance, and considering the emotional meaning of his belongings. These small moments show how responsible decision-making becomes part of daily life, when children talk through their options and make choices that feel right to them.

### ***Weighing Consequences***

Weighing consequences appeared when characters considered how their actions might affect themselves or others before choosing what to do. Shows often represented this through emotional cues, slow decision-making, or reflective dialogue. In *Bluey (2018)*, "Duck Cake" (Season 2, Episode 43) demonstrates this clearly. Bluey does not want to clean her and Bingo's toys, even though her dad asks her to. Once she sees how upset her dad becomes after dropping the cake, she pauses and reconsiders her earlier refusal. Bluey recognizes that helping will make her dad feel better and contributes positively to the celebration. Her tail wagging shows, nonverbally, that helping feels rewarding. This scene illustrates Bluey weighing the social and emotional consequences of inaction, then choosing a prosocial response. The message is subtle: understanding how one's decisions affect others is a key part of responsible decision-making.

*Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (2012)* also models weighing consequences, often through guided songs. In *What Friends Like* (Season 7, Episode 2), Daniel must consider how Katerina feels when she does not want a high-five. Instead of insisting, he learns to pause, reflect, and choose a different greeting. Responsible decision-making includes respecting preferences and predicting how actions may affect a friend's comfort.

### ***Helping Others***

Acts of helping others demonstrated responsible decision-making when characters took the initiative to support peers, adults, or their community. Helping was not portrayed as obedience, but as a thoughtful response to someone else's need.

In *Handy Manny (2006)*, "Have a Handy New Year" (Season 2, Episode 25), helping is central to the storyline. After Mr. Lopart makes repeated mistakes, including breaking the New Year's ball, he becomes discouraged and says "it's all my fault." Manny and the community respond by working together to fix the problem and include Mr. Lopart in the celebration. Mr. Lopart then offers his piñata for the ball drop to contribute to the event. This moment reflects responsible decision-making because Mr. Lopart recognizes he can take action to improve the situation and chooses to help the community. His contribution repairs his earlier mistake by offering to use his piñata from his store.

In *Doc McStuffins (2012)*, helping is framed as noticing needs and taking initiative. In *Cece's First Bath (Season 4, Episode 7)*, the toys help Cece feel safe by modeling each step of the bath. Their decisions demonstrate empathy-driven action, reinforcing that responsible decision-making often involves recognizing when someone needs support and responding thoughtfully.

In *Lyla in the Loop (2024)*, helping others is tied to collaborative creativity. In "*Carnival for Luke*" (Season 1, Episode 4), Lyla and her siblings notice Luke is disappointed about his canceled class trip. Lyla starts off by showing Luke carnival pictures. He looks upset when Lyla asks Luke "don't you want to see more carnival pictures?" Luke says "maybe later" and walks away. Lyla says "Maybe we can make a carnival and surprise Luke." The twins, Lyla and Everett work together to make Luke feel better and create an experience for him that he did not

have. They girls are excited to recreate the carnival in the Loops Diner. Their decision reflects awareness of someone else's feelings and willingness to act on that awareness.

### **Diversity, Inclusion and Representation**

Across the eight programs, the analysis showed that diversity, inclusion and representation appeared as important narrative dimensions, even though these elements were not explicitly connected to any single SEL competency. The examination of character interactions and narrative structures revealed that each show incorporated diversity through casting, cultural cues, family structures, linguistic differences, and diverse abilities. These patterns demonstrated how the shows introduce children to a range of identities and experiences. Crucially, diversity appeared within ordinary interactions rather than being relegated to special episodes, suggesting that representation was embedded into the core of storylines. This theme included examples of racial and ethnic diversity, bilingual communication, and neurodiversity, all of which emerged organically through the characters and their environments.

#### ***Ethnic Representation and Family Structure***

Seven out of the eight programs analyzed included characters from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, making representation a visible and integral part of the narrative. In *Doc McStuffins (2012)*, representation is centered on the lead character, a young African American girl depicted as a capable, confident problem-solver. Her mother, an African American physician, portrays Black women in positions of medical occupations and leadership, while her father is a stay-at-home dad, reflecting a family dynamic that challenges traditional gender stereotypes.

In “Night Night, Lala” (Season 3, Episode 26), the show highlights this dynamic by featuring the father caring for the baby and completing household tasks, such as feeding bottles to Doc’s baby sister and cleaning the house. The series normalizes a household where both parents take on meaningful, non-traditional roles. It also emphasizes that children can imagine themselves in professions that reflect their interests, mirroring Doc’s aspiration to become a doctor as she cares for and helps her toys. Furthermore, *Doc McStuffins (2012)* demonstrates a multigenerational family structure. Doc's grandmother is frequently present to assist the parents and children, illustrating a supportive extended family unit where guidance is shared across generations.

Diversity is also visible within Doc’s friendships. For example, in “The Big Sleepover” (Season 2, Episode 13), Doc spends time with her friend Emmie, who is White. These interactions showcase a diverse peer group and reinforce the notion that friendships develop easily among children from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Representation matters in this context because young children see characters of different backgrounds collaborating, playing, and supporting one another without the show needing to call explicit attention to their differences.

Representation also appears within the toy characters, who model a range of emotional and developmental needs. Each toy has its own personality, comfort level, and way of responding to new experiences. In “Night Night, Lala” (Season 3, Episode 26), Lala is depicted as a newer and less experienced toy who needs more reassurance and explanation before she can settle into the bedtime routine. In contrast, Professor Hootsburgh speaks with confidence and often guides the group, showing that characters vary in maturity and emotional readiness. For

example, when the toys prepare for bed, Professor Hootsburgh naturally takes the lead in the routine, acting as a more mature or guiding character. These differences mirror the variations seen among real children and present diversity through behavior, communication styles, and emotional needs.

Findings showed that *Lyla in the Loop* (2024) represents diversity through its characters, family structure, and the broader community Lyla interacts with. Lyla's family is portrayed as a multiracial household, featuring Black parents and a mother of Jamaican heritage. Lyla's mother and father both own Loops Lunch. Lydia (mom) helps run the restaurant while Louis (dad) cooks, offering representation of diverse professional roles within the home. The sibling group includes Lyla, a younger brother (Luke), and twin sisters, showing the unique dynamics and interactions inherent in large families.

Lyla's best friend, Everett Phan, is Vietnamese American. Her presence reinforces peer diversity and reflects that Lyla's friend group includes children from different cultural backgrounds. The community surrounding Lyla also demonstrates extensive diversity. The grocery store worker, Mr. Rivera, speaks with a noticeable Latin accent and uses warm, familiar language with the children, showing representation of linguistic diversity and immigrant or multilingual identities in everyday settings. Another recurring character is Miss Emmaline, an older woman in the neighborhood who appears in both "Lemonade Champs" (Season 1, Episode 6) and "How the Cookie Crumbled" (Season 1, Episode 9). She speaks with a southern drawl, adding another layer of linguistic and cultural representation. These examples illustrate how diversity is woven throughout the series via racial and ethnic identities, varied family structures, and linguistic richness.

What is seen in *Handy Manny* (2006) is a lead character who incorporates Latino representation throughout the series. Manny identifies as Latino and frequently speaks Spanish while immediately explaining the English meaning to viewers. This bilingual communication is integrated into everyday tasks rather than presented as a special lesson, making cultural identity a main part of the plot. In addition, the tools in the show also speak Spanish with accents, reinforcing bilingual diversity among the characters.

Among the three episodes analyzed, Manny and the tools consistently emphasize Hispanic culture, yet the wider community of Sheetrock Hills also reflects a diverse group of individuals. The setting includes many characters from different backgrounds, demonstrating a multicultural environment. For example, Kelly, a White woman, owns the hardware store; Mayor Rosa is a Hispanic woman in a leadership role; Mr. Lopart, who owns the candy shop next door, is White; Mr. Portillo, who owns the bakery, is Mexican; and the gym coach is Black. Manny is consistently portrayed as a positive role model who prioritizes helping others.

This representation appears across several episodes. In “Have a Handy New Year” (Season 2, Episode 25), Manny and the tools move from task to task, interacting with various community members and showing people of different backgrounds working together. In “Chico Goes to Preschool” (Season 3, Episode 13), Chico’s preschool teacher, Mrs. Thompson, is Afro-Latina, and the children in the classroom appear to come from different ethnic backgrounds. Another example appears in “Rusty’s Little Light Lie” (Season 1, Episode 6), when Manny goes door to door collecting replacement lightbulbs. Though there is little dialogue, viewers see neighbors from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Asian, Black, White, and

Hispanic individuals, open their doors. Manny later emphasizes that they collected lightbulbs “from friends and neighbors,” reinforcing the diversity of the community.

For racial and ethnic representation, *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood (2012)* includes diversity within the classroom and throughout the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Teacher Harriet is a Black women educator, and the classroom shows children from different racial backgrounds. When Teacher Harriet gathers the children in a circle, there is clear visual diversity among the characters. The show also represents diversity among animal characters, as Daniel is a tiger, O is an owl, Jodi is a platypus, and many more. The series portrays a preschool group that reflects a variety of backgrounds and identities.

Similarly, in *Bluey (2018)*, diversity is expressed through the different shapes, breeds, and colors of dog characters. Within Bluey’s own family, Bluey and her dad Bandit share similar blue coloring, while Bingo and Chilli share a brown tone. The family also speaks with an Australian accent, which reflects the cultural setting of the show. Their family structure shows both parents working, with Bandit employed as an archaeologist and Chilli working as a TSA sniff agent (airport security). In the episode “Camping” (Season 1, Episode 43), Jean-Luc’s family appears visually and linguistically different from Bluey’s family, speaking French at the campground, and Jean-Luc's parents are a blue-ish purple color which introduces bilingualism and cultural difference.

### ***Language and Cultural Representation***

Findings showed that two shows demonstrated language-based representation most clearly, both through multilingual communication and through the use of inclusive, supportive

dialogue among characters. Among all the programs, *Handy Manny* (2006) incorporated multilingual learning most consistently, teaching Spanish vocabulary and expressions alongside the SEL messages. Across all three episodes analyzed, Manny begins with “*Hola tools*,” and continues to integrate Spanish every few sentences. For example, in “Rusty’s Little Light Lie” (Season 1, Episode 6), when the Mayor calls asking for help at the theater, Manny responds, “*A sus órdenes. At your service*,” before turning to the tools and saying, “*¡Vámonos! Let’s go*.” In every episode coded, Manny counts the tools as they hop into the toolbox, “*uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho*”, creating predictable repetition that helps young viewers remember the numbers.

Language learning is also built into the show’s music and vocabulary. The tools’ recurring song includes, “Hop up, jump in, come on, let’s go... Hop up, jump in, *sí, vámonos*... Let’s get to work, *muy rápido*,” blending English and Spanish naturally. In “Have a Handy New Year” (Season 2, Episode 25), Manny continues this pattern. While repairing the New Year’s Eve ball, he asks, “*¿Cómo se ve? How does it look?*” Felipe responds, “*Magnífico*,” and Pat the hammer translates with “Perfect.” Later, when Mayor Rosa gives Manny and Mr. Lopart instructions for the “*Año Nuevo* party,” Pat is unsure of the meaning, prompting Manny to explain, “The *Año Nuevo* party is the New Year’s Eve party... *Año Nuevo* means New Year in Spanish.” These scenes show Manny modeling slow, clear translation for both the tools and the audience.

Cultural representation appears through language as well. When Manny and the tools check on Mrs. Portillo at her bakery in “Have a Handy New Year,” (Season 2, Episode 25) she references tamales and buñuelos, foods widely associated with Latin American traditions. Felipe

explains buñuelos as “sweet tortillas that are fried and sprinkled with cinnamon,” and Mrs. Portillo describes preparing “Bowls of uvas, grapes” for the tradition of eating twelve grapes at midnight for good luck in each month of the coming year. As the tools help make the buñuelos, they sing instructions using Spanish question words, “where, *dónde*... when, *cuándo*... how, *cómo*...”, further incorporating vocabulary and culture into the storyline. Across all episodes analyzed, *Handy Manny (2006)* consistently used Spanish, cultural traditions, and bilingual communication as part of the narrative.

In contrast, *Bluey (2018)* incorporated linguistic diversity in a subtle and more situational way. The show does not focus on language-learning or cultural explanation. Instead, accents provide the primary linguistic representation: Bluey and her family speak with Australian accents, which grounds the series culturally but does not teach specific vocabulary or discuss Australian-focused culture. The clearest example of multilingual interaction appears in “Camping” (Season 1, Episode 43), when Bluey befriends Jean-Luc, who speaks French. Bluey and Jean-Luc talk back and forth in English and French, but the episode does not translate Jean-Luc’s French dialogue or Bluey’s English. Instead, Bluey and Jean-Luc rely on gestures, facial expressions, and shared imaginative play to understand one another. This creates a subtle form of representation, showing that connection can occur even when characters do not speak the same language. However, because the series does not translate or repeatedly use another language, the emphasis on linguistic diversity is less noticeable than in *Handy Manny (2006)*.

### ***Representation of Differences***

Findings showed that many programs represented individual differences through characters who varied in communication styles, sensory needs, emotional readiness, health

issues, and developmental levels. These differences were shown as part of everyday interactions, helping to normalize the idea that children experience the world in different ways. Across the sample, characters responded with patience, flexibility, and support, creating environments where unique needs were acknowledged and accommodated. The shows included several portrayals of neurodiversity, sensory preferences, and varied emotional or developmental approaches, illustrating that children engage with the world in diverse and meaningful ways.

*Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) offers one of the clearest portrayals of neurodiversity and individual differences, especially in the episodes coded, "Daniel's New Friend Max" (Season 5, Episode 14) and "Jodi's Asthma" (Season 5, Episode 12). In "Daniel's New Friend Max," Daniel learns what autism is through Teacher Harriet, who reads a book called *Max Visits School* to introduce the class to Max. As she reads, Max covers his ears when the classroom becomes loud. Teacher Harriet explains, "Max needs quiet voices... something that might be okay to you might be too loud for Max," highlighting that everyone experiences things differently. She then sings, "When a friend needs different things than you, there are some things you can do," and continues reading to explain that: (1) Max likes having his own space, (2) he enjoys sharing things he is interested in, and (3) he needs more time to understand questions.

Instead of treating these needs as problems, the episode shows the class adjusting, lowering their voices, slowing their movements, and giving Max the time and space he needs. Daniel, in turn, learns to communicate at Max's pace. Later, when only Daniel is invited to a tea party, he says, "Wait, you forgot to invite Max." Katerina initially responds, "I thought Max only wants to play buses," but she then realizes that Max may still want to join. Daniel reassures Max by saying, "I'll wait for you, Max. I like playing buses with you." The children learn that play

can look different depending on what helps someone feel comfortable, and their willingness to adjust allows Max to be included.

A second example of adjusting to differences appears in “Jodi’s Asthma” (Season 5, Episode 12), which focuses on understanding health differences and promoting inclusion. While Daniel and friends are playing at the park, Jodi becomes out of breath. When Daniel asks why she sounds different, Jodi’s mom administers an inhaler. Daniel asks, “What’s that?” showing curiosity and a desire to understand her needs. Jodi’s asthma represents a health difference that some children experience. The song “We can find a way for everyone to play” explains the idea that differences can be accommodated. Daniel and his friends choose a sitting-down game so everyone can participate. Daniel later acknowledges the success of this adaptation, showing that the true value of play lies in keeping the group connected rather than sticking to the original activity.

Later in the episode, during snack time, O the Owl’s uncle, offers homemade peach pie. Everyone is excited, but Daniel looks sad and says to the camera, “I’m allergic to peaches. I can’t eat them or I’ll feel sick.” This introduces another form of health-related difference. Jodi notices Daniel is upset and asks, “Why are you not eating, Daniel?” Daniel responds, “I want to eat, but I can’t eat peaches. I am allergic,” expressing that he feels left out. Daniel is wanting his peers to understand him the way he understood Jodi’s asthma.

Another representation of differences occurs in *Carl the Collector* (2024), where Carl’s character introduces an authentic portrayal of neurodiversity through the way he communicates, processes emotions, and responds to social situations. In “The Fall” (Season 1, Episode 13), Carl reacts differently when Nico gets hurt, and his friends initially misread his behavior. He has a

moment of internal reflection when Nico asks, “Didn’t you see me fall?” Carl pauses to think and quietly talks himself through the moment, saying, “Come on, Carl. Think. Think,” showing his effort to process what happened. Carl does not know how to interpret the situation, so he tries to gain a better understanding by going to Nico’s house to ask what exactly happened. He says, “I think you are mad at me but I don’t know what I did,” which reflects his attempt to clarify social cues that feel confusing to him. With the guidance of his mother, Carl begins to understand why Nico felt upset. As he explains the situation to her, he becomes briefly sidetracked talking about himself but is still working hard to make sense of the interaction. When Carl asks, “Is it because I am autistic?” his mother gently affirms, “Yes,” helping him navigate how autism shapes his experiences and friendships.

Towards the end, when Carl explains to Nico that he has autism, his peers understand a clearer idea of his behavior and bridge the gap between their differences. Throughout the series, Carl’s need for clear routines, special interests, and direct communication is treated as part of who he is, and his friends adapt in ways that strengthen their relationships which included the theme relationship skills.

### **Narrative Strategies**

Across the eight programs, the analysis showed that SEL messages were delivered through several narrative strategies. These included adult-guided SEL instruction, where caregivers, teachers, or older figures provided explanations or reframed situations; peer-to-peer modeling, where characters demonstrated skills directly to one another; and implicit or explicit messaging, depending on the show and episode. Some programs conveyed SEL concepts through direct statements, songs, or labeled emotions, while others embedded SEL in interactions, visual

cues, or collaborative problem-solving. These strategies showed the different ways SEL is constructed within popular children's television. Findings showed that SEL in the sample was rarely delivered by only one means. Instead, most programs blended adult-guided instruction with peer-to-peer modeling, creating multi-learning environments where adults introduced or framed the SEL idea, and peers reinforced or reenacted it through their own interactions.

### *Who is giving the SEL lesson*

I found that adults played a primary role in guiding children through SEL moments in all eight programs. Adults introduced language for emotions, helped reframe thoughts, and modeled strategies that children later practiced on their own. The adult-guided SEL instruction appeared in every show and every episode, although the nature of adult guidance differed across programs. In most cases, adults delivered the SEL lesson, acting as emotional anchors, instructors, and narrators who provided the language children needed to make sense of their experiences.

In *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), Teacher Harriet, along with the parents of the preschool children, played a central role in giving the SEL message. In the episodes "Daniel's New Friend Max" (Season 5, Episode 14) and "What Friends Like" (Season 7, Episode 2), Teacher Harriet introduces emotional vocabulary, explains differences in children's needs, and uses songs to provide actionable social interaction.

In "Daniel's New Friend Max" (Season 5, Episode 14), the preschoolers gather in a circle, and Teacher Harriet begins by saying, "Class, I want you to meet Max. Max is my nephew, which means I'm his aunt." When Prince Wednesday responds, "You're an aunt?" she clarifies, "Yes, I'm a teacher and an aunt." This moment introduces the idea of interpersonal

relationships. The SEL instruction becomes more focused when she tells the class, “Max is autistic, which means some things about him are different from you.” She answers the children’s questions, reads a book about Max, and continues teaching through song: “When a friend needs different things than you, there are some things you can do.” Teacher Harriet models how to interpret Max’s preferences, how to communicate with him, and how the class can adapt to include him. Her direct guidance establishes the social and emotional expectations for the episode and leads into peer-to-peer modeling that follows.

A similar pattern appears in “What Friends Like” (Season 7, Episode 2), when Daniel tries to give Katerina a high five and becomes upset that she does not want one. Teacher Harriet steps in gently and asks, “Can you tell me what is happening here?” After Daniel explains his feelings, she reframes the situation and introduces the SEL message: “Not everyone likes to say hello in the same way.” She then sings the key lesson, “Sometimes we like different things, it helps to ask, What do you like?” Her role is to clarify the misunderstanding, provide language for the situation, and set up a framework that Daniel and his peers practice on their own later in the episode.

Lastly, in “Jodi’s Asthma” (Season 5, Episode 12), adult guidance again anchors the episode’s SEL message. When Jodi experiences asthma symptoms at the park, her mother steps in to help the children understand what is happening and reassures them, and sings “We can find a way for everyone to play.” Her calm explanation helps normalize Jodi’s health needs and demonstrates to the peer group to adapt their play accordingly.

I found that once the adult presented the initial SEL message, peer interactions played a major role in how SEL lessons unfolded. In *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood (2012)*, this was

shown in “Daniel’s New Friend Max” (Season 5, Episode 14). After Teacher Harriet explains Max’s sensory needs, Daniel and his classmates take the lead in applying the message themselves. For example, after the initial SEL introduction, Daniel wants to play with Max but does not understand why Max only wants to play with buses. Teacher Harriet steps in briefly and repeats the song, “When a friend needs different things than you, there are some things you can do,” and Daniel repeats the song back. From there, Daniel adjusts his play, makes space for Max, speaks more quietly, and involves him in activities based on Max’s interests. Peer modeling continues as Katerina and O the Owl stop by during playtime and invite only Daniel to their tea party. Daniel responds, “You forgot to invite Max,” prompting them to pause, reconsider, and decide to invite Max as well; these moments show children putting the SEL lessons into practice.

*Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood (2012)* is unique because at the end of each coded episode, Daniel sings a full version of the SEL song, modeling the learned behaviors directly for the audience. The narrative strategy remains consistent across episodes, an SEL phrase is introduced by an adult, repeated throughout the story, and the children try to learn the message and once they do, the SEL phrase is expanded into a full-length song at the end. This structure makes the SEL message easy to follow and reinforces how the adult-guided instruction transitions into peer-led SEL modeling.

In *Handy Manny (2006)*, I observed that the narrative techniques relied mostly on adult-guided SEL, with Manny and other adult figures such as Mayor Rosa and Mrs. Portillo providing the framing of the SEL lesson. Across the coded episodes, Manny consistently sets the emotional tone by modeling problem-solving, kindness, and responsibility for both the tools and the community. For example, in “Rusty’s Little Light Lie” (Season 1, Episode 6), when Manny first

discovers the broken theater bulbs, he models what it looks like to take responsibility. Manny tells Mayor Rosa, "I'm sorry I didn't finish the job but all the light bulbs were broken," which helps Rusty feel safe enough to tell the truth. Rusty admits, "I wasn't careful with the box...that's why all the bulbs are broken." Manny then gently asks, "Rusty, why didn't you tell me when it happened?" and Rusty responds, "I was afraid you'd get mad at me for not listening. I'm really sorry, Manny." Manny reassures him by saying, "I'm glad you told me, Rusty, but I think there's something else you need to do." making Rusty think and make the right decision. When Rusty tells Mayor Rosa what happened, she adds another layer of guidance by saying, "One thing I've learned is if you tell the truth, you usually don't get in trouble." Although she is concerned about the community event, Mayor Rosa does not make Rusty feel bad. Instead, she focuses on what needs to be done next, helping him understand the situation without feeling ashamed. Similarly to *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (2012)* there is a song in each episode as the characters resolve the problem, In this episode they sing "Let's get going and fix it right...trabajamos juntos, we work together now" this song is recurring in all the episodes and it promotes the idea of working together in a community.

Across the three episodes coded in *Handy Manny (2006)*, the message is introduced through adult guidance that helps clarify the problem and shape how the characters respond. Manny and other adults in the community step in to explain what is happening, ask reflective questions, and model calm, constructive ways to address the issue. The adults' responses guide the direction of the episode: Manny identifies what needs to be fixed, helps others understand their role in the situation, and demonstrates the next steps in solving the problem. Peer-to-peer SEL is shown, but it is mainly adults who give the SEL message.

*Blue's Clues & You! (2019)* was the only show in the sample where the adult was the only one responsible for delivering the SEL message across all three episodes. Blue communicates nonverbally, and Josh takes on the role of guiding emotions, asking reflective questions, and modeling how to work through a problem through Blue's clues. He acts as the narrator, emotional interpreter, and all of the SEL instruction comes directly through him.

An example of this is in "Sad Day with Blue" (Season 1, Episode 6). The opening scene begins with Josh looking into the camera and saying, "I am so glad you are here, I could really use your help...I can't figure out how Blue is feeling." He immediately follows up with, "How do you think Blue is feeling?" When children's voices respond "she's sad," Josh asks, "How do you know?" to the audience and then looks at Blue's body language and confirms, "She is sad." From the start, he is observant and describes the non-verbal emotions to help identify Blue's feelings before moving on to the cause. Josh then tells the audience, "I'm going to need your help to find out why Blue is sad, I don't like it when Blue is sad," and asks the audience, "You will help, right?" He pauses, then responds, "Oh great," continuing the pattern of guided participation. The narrative structure centers on understanding sadness and identifying the emotion through a series of clues left by Blue's paw prints. Josh leads each step by asking questions, interpreting the clues, and encouraging viewers to think aloud with him.

Throughout the episode, Josh keeps the SEL message active by asking open-ended questions "How do you feel when you're sad?," labeling emotional cues, and breaking the problem into small parts. His tone is warm and direct, and he frequently validates ideas with "That's a great idea!," which keeps the structure predictable and clear. Due to the show relying

heavily on his narration, Josh's messages are intentionally repetitive and steady, making sure the viewers can follow the emotional reasoning from beginning to the end.

*Doc McStuffins (2012)* showed both adult guidance and peer modeling, often layered within the same episode. While Doc frequently acts as an adult-like figure with her toys, her parents are the first models of caregiving and emotional reassurance. They demonstrate routines, provide comfort, and model patience, skills that Doc later repeats in her medical play with her toys. The toys, themselves, also show a hierarchy based on age, with Doc's older toys guiding Maya's baby toys. This was shown in the episode "Night Night, Lala" (Season 3, Episode 26), where Professor Hootsburg is responsible for getting everyone ready for bed. She is portrayed as an older, more experienced toy and instructs the younger toys in the bedtime routine. Professor Hootsburg and Doc work together to help Lala adjust to being a new toy. At one point she says, "Let me help you, dear," which demonstrates peer modeling within the toy group. She continues guiding Lala by explaining, "Since it's your first night, I thought I could help you out," and reassuring her with phrases such as "Don't worry, dear" when Lala expresses discomfort.

Doc often steps in as the primary adult figure for the toys. When Lala wakes the other toys, both Professor Hootsburg and Doc move toward comforting her. Lala says, "I don't want to go to the nursery all by myself," and Doc responds by singing, "Hey, what's going on? Tell me what's wrong, I know there's something we can do, it might not be clear, that's why I am here, tell me what's bothering you." As the toys gather around Lala, peer modeling becomes increasingly visible. Lala explains, "This place is new to me, I don't feel like I know what to do or anything," and adds, "It's a kind of scary feeling." Lambie responds by offering a cuddle; Hallie, another toy, says, "You know you're not alone, sugar," Stuffie adds, "Everybody feels

scared at bedtime sometimes,” and Chilly shares, “Like me, I get scared at bedtime, lunchtime, and nap time.”

The next scene shifts to Doc’s parents comforting Maya in the nursery, saying, “You’re new here. Everything must feel strange,” while Doc and Lala watch from the doorway. Doc’s father continues to tell Maya, “We love you so much, and you are part of the family now.” Doc then connects the situations between Maya and Lala and begins another song: “This is where you belong, home is not just where you sleep, home is love and family.” Doc and the toys join in, continuing to model the bedtime routine and reassurance for Lala. Throughout the episode, the layering of Doc’s parents, Doc herself, and the older toys creates a sequence of guidance that shapes how the SEL message is carried out on screen.

Findings also showed that peer-to-peer modeling was a frequent narrative strategy across episodes. Characters often demonstrated SEL skills to one another through shared play, joint problem-solving, or direct conversations. *Carl the Collector (2024)* displayed this most prominently. While adults do play a supportive role, the emphasis across the episodes is on children working together to understand the situation and move the SEL message forward. In many scenes, the initial recognition of a problem, and the first attempts to address it, happen between peers rather than in front of an adult. The children often initiate the interaction themselves, showing autonomy as they try to make sense of what happened.

In “The Fall” (Season 1, Episode 13), after Nico falls and Carl freezes, Nico walks away frustrated. Arugula, Nico's twin sister, immediately steps in to calm the moment, saying, “I’m sure he would’ve,” before the doorbell rings and Carl appears to ask why Nico is mad at him. Nico, still upset, says, “Friends need friends when they need help.” Again, Arugula tries to de-

escalate the situation by reassuring Nico, “Nico didn’t get hurt too much, she’s fine, she just needs a little time to feel better. Thanks for coming by.” She then turns to Nico and gently suggests, “Maybe you can just listen to Carl...I really don’t think he meant to make you feel bad.”

Although Carl later seeks guidance from his mother to better understand what happened, the peer dynamics surrounding him continue to shape the narrative. His mother helps him put language to his experience –“I think you had a hard time figuring out what to do when Nico fell because your brain works differently” – and encourages him to talk things out with Nico. Carl practices what to say –“I wanted to help but I didn’t know how, you see my brain works differently than some kids” – and takes notes before returning. While Carl is preparing with his mother, in another scene Arugula again checks in on Nico, reminding her, “I know you are angry at Carl, but he’s our friend. I don’t think he meant to hurt your feelings.” This peer reassurance sets the stage for Carl and Nico to resolve the misunderstanding themselves.

When Carl and Nico finally speak directly, Carl explains how scared he felt when she fell and shares, “Sometimes it takes me a little longer to understand new stuff. I hope this helps you understand what happened a little better.” Nico responds, “It does, thanks for telling me. I kind of get it now.” Their honest exchange resolves the conflict, with Carl asking, “Do you forgive me, Nico?” and Nico responding, “Of course I do,” followed by her own apology.

Throughout the episode, Carl shows autonomy by initiating the repair; he goes to Nico’s house, asks for clarification, practices what to say, and ultimately takes responsibility for reconnecting with his friend. His peers, in turn, model supportive communication and emotional understanding, reinforcing SEL messages without the direct presence of an adult. The episode

ends with the group playing together again, underscoring how peer interactions carry the SEL message forward through collaborative repair, encouragement, and mutual understanding.

Shows like *Lyla in the Loop* (2024) and *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023) demonstrate that SEL learning is often developed through sibling-guided interaction, with adults providing some of the framework but the children doing most of the problem-solving themselves. In “Lemonade Champs” (Season 1, Episode 6), Lyla’s older twin sisters step in, not to take over the situation, but to suggest a strategy for how to decide the right amount of lemonade to make on sunny versus rainy days. Their idea, the “lemonade champs” chart, gives Lyla and Everett a tool to reason through the problem independently. The older sisters provide the initial guidance, but Lyla and Everett maintain autonomy as they carry out the work. The SEL message is introduced by the siblings, but it is peer collaboration that drives the solution forward.

A similar pattern appears in *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023). In “Snout and About” (Season 1, Episode 1), Zeke first turns to his older siblings, Malik and Zadie, saying, “I lost Snout.” Grandma Super offers a brief structure by asking, “Why don’t you tell us what happened?” and “How can we work this out?” but it is Malik and Zadie who take over the problem-solving. Malik suggests “why don't we search the house” and the three brothers retrace Zeke’s steps, think through his morning routine, and brainstorm where Snout could be. Grandma Super provides emotional stability and reassurance, yet the brainstorming and physical work are carried out through sibling teamwork. These shows demonstrated examples of siblings delivering the SEL message, while adults create the SEL starting point. This highlights the importance of who delivers the message to the child and the difference in how the child processes it.

## **Formal Features**

### ***Character Format***

Across the eight children's television programs, the show's edits and visual design of characters varied a lot, creating different formats through which emotions, actions, and SEL moments were displayed. The sample included live-action, human-like animated characters, and anthropomorphic objects and animals. These formats shape what viewers see on screen, how emotions are expressed with different kinds of character formats, as well as how cues are communicated.

### ***Live Action vs. Animation***

*Blue's Clues & You! (2019)* was the only program in the coded shows that featured a real human actor. Josh appears on screen throughout each episode, directly addressing viewers, narrating events, and reacting to moments. His facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and tone provide clear visual cues for interpreting emotions and messages. The animated characters, such as Blue, Magenta, mailbox, side table and other objects, interact with him but rely on Josh's movements and expressive sounds, and from time to time some guidance from the animated objects. The blend of live-action and animation makes Josh the primary source of emotional expression and guidance, while Blue's nonverbal cues provide simpler, symbolic gestures for viewers to interpret.

### *Human Characters vs. Non-Human Characters*

Two shows feature both animated human characters as well as non-human characters that have human-like characteristics. *Doc McStuffins (2012)* includes an animated human family and community, but Doc's stuffed animals become fully alive when she plays doctor and speaks to them. Lambie, Stuffie, Hallie, and Chilly talk, move, express emotions, and participate like peers. Doc's world mixes human animation with toy characters who behave as human-like companions. *Handy Manny (2006)* uses human characters like Manny, Kelly, Mayor Rosa, and neighbors, but the tools are anthropomorphic. The tools speak, sing, show emotions, and have distinct personalities. They function like a group of friends who help Manny solve problems.

Three shows rely entirely on anthropomorphic animal communities where characters behave like humans. In *Bluey (2018)* all characters are dogs who talk, play, attend school, and live a day-to-day family life. Bluey and her family speak and act like humans with their emotional and social behavior. Second, *Work It Out Wombats! (2023)* is set in the Treeborough, where the main characters, Malik, Zadie, and Zeke, are wombats. Other neighbors include various animals, all speaking and interacting like humans. Although the characters are animals, their facial expressions, body language, and emotional dynamics reflect human characteristics. In *Carl the Collector (2024)*, Carl and his community are all anthropomorphic animals, Carl the raccoon, his beaver best friend Sheldon, the hyperactive squirrel Forrest, and twin bunnies Nico and Arugula, who all speak, experience challenges and emotions, and interact like human children. Lastly, in *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (2012)*, Teacher Harriet is human, while Daniel, O the Owl, Jodi Platypus, Katerina Kitty, and others are anthropomorphic animals.

Human animated characters exist such as Max and Prince Wednesday. They all learn, play, and solve problems side by side, creating a unique mixed-format world.

### ***Explicit vs. Implicit SEL Messages***

It was interesting to see the instructional differences in how SEL lessons are delivered, that is, explicit (direct) instruction versus implicit (indirect) narrative modeling. Shows such as *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), *Handy Manny* (2006), *Doc McStuffin* (2012), and *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) utilize the direct instruction approach, relying on the premise that emotional skills, such as empathy or understanding, are best learned through clear definitions and repetitive practice. What was surprising to see was that these four shows rely on songs to make their explicit message clear. In *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), for example, songs act as catchy cues that turn complex feelings into simple ideas that children can easily recall when they need them. *Daniel Tiger* presents the most explicit lesson of all the shows, often turning the short message into a full-length song by the end of the episode. Similarly, *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) supports this explicit style by using the fourth wall break to transform the child from a passive listener into an active viewer. The show moves at a slow pace so young viewers can follow along and help solve the clues. When the host, Josh, pauses to ask, "How do you think Blue feels?" he is making the at-home viewers practice empathy in real time. This can be very effective for younger audiences because it gives them the basic vocabulary they need for self-awareness and self-management, making sure that children can name an emotion and learn how to manage it.

On the other hand, the implicit narrative approach was demonstrated by *Bluey* (2018), and *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), relying on observational learning from the child discovering where

the lesson is embedded within the plot. Instead of taking time to explain an emotion out loud, these programs show the characters dealing with social situations and moving past the message. The consequences of their behavior are shown through action rather than words, or if words are used, they are very brief. In *Bluey* (2018), for instance, relationship skills are not taught through repeated emphasis on a lesson, but through the interactions of scenes, where characters read non-verbal cues and adjust their behavior. In “Duck Cake” (Season 2, Episode 43), it is Bingo’s birthday, and Bluey and her dad, Bandit, are making a duck cake. Bluey wants to help make the cake but is asked to clean up her toys first. When she asks, “Why do I have to?” and insists on helping with the cake, Dad reiterates, “You can’t just help with the fun stuff, kid.” Once Bandit messes up the duck cake, Bluey sees his sadness and silently grabs a paper towel to clean the floor. Bandit thanks Bluey, and her tail wags as a sign of happiness; thus, the show implicitly depicts that doing things without being asked can lead to happiness.

This approach assumes that the child watching already understands enough about feelings to figure out the lesson from the context. Ultimately, both methods can be useful for a complete understanding of SEL education. When children are watching SEL media, the explicit instruction builds the important set of tools of emotional vocabulary, while implicit narrative demonstrates how to apply those tools within real-world relationships. It is important to note that the gap between educational messages and narrative languages are tied closely together in children's media.

### ***Pacing as an Editing Feature***

Pacing refers to how quickly or slowly a show moves from one moment to the next. This is accomplished through editing choices such as scene length, dialogue timing, pauses between

lines, transitions, and the speed of cuts. In children's television, pacing influences how much time characters spend expressing emotions, solving problems, or interacting with others, and it affects the level of cognitive processing required from young viewers. Across the sample, pacing appeared in a range from slow and reflective to quick and energetic, depending on how each show structures its storytelling.

*Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) had the slowest pacing in the sample. Josh frequently pauses to allow viewer participation, and scenes unfold in a step-by-step format tied to finding clues. Each line is held for several moments before the story moves forward, which was adopted from the original version of *Blue's Clues* (1996) that pioneered this format. Similarly, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) used slow, rhythmic pacing. Emotional conversations are stretched out, often supported by repeated songs that reinforce key ideas. Scenes transition slowly, which gives time for reflection and processing. *Doc McStuffins* (2012) follows a similar slow pace. Each episode is built around a check-up routine, moving through clear steps: identifying the problem, offering support, and resolving concerns. This structure slows the rhythm of the story and creates predictable transitions. In addition, *Handy Manny* (2006), also uses slower pacing. Although the tools bring energy to the screen, the overall story unfolds gradually. Manny pauses to explain situations, offer reassurance, or walk characters through problem-solving steps, which slows the rhythm and creates space around emotional moments. Lastly, *Carl the Collector* (2024), used a slow and reflective pacing style. Scenes often linger on Carl's thought process, showing how he works through inner monologues or uncertainties. Dialogue is steady, and moments of internal reflection are held long enough for viewers to see Carl reasoning through what happened before the story progresses.

Pacing varied in ways that shaped how the story unfolded. *Lyla in the Loop* (2024) used a moderate pace, with dialogue that moves steadily and scenes that slow down during moments of reasoning or shared problem-solving. In contrast, *Bluey* (2018) featured one of the fastest pacing styles, shifting quickly between scenes, playful ideas, and short emotional moments that resolve within brief exchanges. *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023), followed a similarly upbeat and energetic rhythm, with rapid scene changes and quick dialogue, but a bit more emphasis on the message to keeps the story moving.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### **SEL, CASEL, Diversity, and Narrative Techniques**

This study was designed to understand how popular animated children's media conveyed Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) messages. Among the eight shows, my analysis showed that one message is clear: SEL is not treated as a stand-alone lesson. Instead, these Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) skills of (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) responsible decision-making, and (5) relationship core skills are embedded directly in the storylines that children view every day. I wanted to examine how contemporary children's television programs portray SEL across these five themes and three additional themes of, (1) diversity, inclusion and representation, (2) narrative techniques and (3) formal features. Within the sample, characters modeled different aspects of the above-mentioned themes in ways that reflected real life childhood experiences. These portrayals on television, including representation of diverse families, languages, abilities, neurodivergence, needs and cultural identities, suggest that children's media can play a meaningful role in shaping how young viewers might learn to understand themselves, relate to others, and navigate differences in their social worlds.

### ***SEL-Focused vs. Learning-Focused with Embedded SEL***

My results indicate that while SEL themes are present across the selected children's television shows, the types of their delivery vary based on the program's design. The analysis suggests that an intentional design plays an important role in delivering different types of SEL messages. I see a difference in both the quantity and quality of SEL representation between

shows designed with an explicit SEL curriculum and those driven mainly by entertainment or implicit narrative goals with SEL themes.

The most notable difference observed in the analysis was the relationship between a show's educational intent and the clarity of its SEL messaging. Programs designed with an explicit SEL focus, specifically *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019), *Doc McStuffins* (2012), and *Carl the Collector* (2024), demonstrated a higher frequency of SEL competencies and provided higher quality resolutions to social conflicts. In the explicitly SEL-focused shows, social and emotional concepts appeared continuously, often in every scene. For example, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), does not leave the identification of emotions for children to figure out on their own; it uses an instructional format where an adult labels the emotion, introduces a strategy via a song (e.g., "When a friend needs different things than you"), and the protagonist practices it multiple times. Similarly, *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019), uses a number of direct dialogue sequences to identify and address emotions.

In contrast, shows identified as learning-focused with embedded SEL like *Bluey* (2018), *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), *Handy Manny* (2006), and *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023) show SEL themes less frequently. In these programs, the primary goal is often learning such as academic learning, cognitive problem-solving, family dynamics, or STEM focused (e.g., *Lyla and the Loop* (2024) focuses on computational thinking and *Work it out Wombats!* (2023), focus on problem-solving). While emotional moments occur, such as Lyla's frustration with the cookies or Bluey's sadness over Jean-Luc, they are often singular plot points rather than the recurring focus of the episode. Consequently, the quantity of teachable SEL moments is slightly lower than in shows or episodes that focus on explicit SEL themes.

The difference between these two groups of shows (SEL-focused shows vs. learning-focused with embedded SEL) is most visible in how conflicts are resolved. In the SEL-focused shows, conflict resolution is shown through dialogue and strategy. When a character in *Doc McStuffins* (2012) or *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) faces a challenge, the narrative pauses, and an adult or mentor figure steps in to label the feeling, explain the social nuance, and offer a verbal strategy (e.g. when Lala is scared to sleep alone in the crib, Doc intervenes and sings to Lala: "Hey, what's going on? Tell me what's wrong, I know there's something we can do, it might not be clear, that's why I am here, tell me what's bothering you.") The resolution relies on the characters using emotional regulation strategies or verbal communication to solve the problem.

Conversely, in the learning-focused with embedded SEL shows like *Bluey* (2018), conflict is often resolved through action, play, or situational changes rather than explicit regulation strategies. For instance, in *Bluey* (2018), the father's sadness over the cake is resolved because Bluey takes action to clean the floor. While this models prosocial behavior (helping), it lacks the explicit scaffolding found in *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012). Bluey does not state, "Dad is sad, so I will help him to make him feel better." She simply acts. For a developmentally advanced child, this implicit modeling is valuable. However, for a preschooler who struggles to understand non-verbal cues, the lack of explicit dialogue may hinder the lesson.

Furthermore, the resolution in learning-focused with embedded SEL shows sometimes relies on external factors rather than internal SEL skills. In *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), the focus is often on the logical solution to a problem such as recreating the carnival at home so her little brother can enjoy it, rather than emotional management of the disappointment. While this promotes resilience, it differs from the internal emotional processing seen in *Carl the Collector*

(2024) or *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012). Therefore, intentional SEL shows appear to be a predictor of high-quality SEL representation; shows that set out to teach SEL provide children with verbal tools (songs, phrases), whereas shows that aim to teach with embedded SEL often provide behavioral models which may be harder for young children to understand and replicate.

### ***Self-Management as a Supported Process***

My findings related to self-management challenge the idea that emotional regulation happens instantly or entirely on its own. Across the shows, characters were rarely shown to calm down or regulate instantly. Instead, self-management was portrayed as something that develops over time and often depends on support from routines, familiar objects, and other people. Shows such as *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023) and *Doc McStuffins* (2012) highlighted how routines and predictability help children feel emotionally steady. Zeke's attachment to his bedtime routine and comfort object (Snout), shows that children often manage their emotions best when their environment feels familiar and safe. The shows in my sample also demonstrated that calming down is often both a physical and a mental obstacle. Characters relaxed through quiet spaces, slower movements, and calmer voices. These portrayals reflect the reality that young children might need co-regulation from adults or peers before they learn to manage emotions on their own. I find it interesting that *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) relies almost entirely on the adult host to guide emotional regulation, further reinforcing the idea that emotional management in early childhood is often a shared process.

### ***Decision-Making in a Social Context***

My analysis for decision-making reveals that the shows in my sample rarely present choices as individual or isolated actions. Instead, decisions are closely tied to relationships and awareness of others. Characters often made choices based on how their actions might affect friends, family members, or the broader community. For example, characters helped and changed their behavior because they noticed someone else was hurt or disappointed. Even when characters made mistakes, such as Rusty lying in *Handy Manny* (2006), the focus was not on punishment but on repairing trust and making things right. I interpret this as a restorative approach to decision-making. These shows are intended to teach children that being responsible does not mean being perfect, it means recognizing the impact of one's actions and taking steps to repair relationships and support the group.

### **Narrative Delivery and Formal Feature**

Beyond the explicit SEL content of the shows, the delivery of specific narrative techniques used to convey the message plays a role in how children process SEL. I identified three primary key elements that may determine the efficiency of SEL delivery: who is giving the SEL message, how the message is delivered, and the pacing of the narrative.

#### ***Direct vs. Indirect***

A tool I found in several programs was direct address, the technique of breaking the fourth wall to speak directly to the children. This tool is central to shows like *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) and *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), where the protagonist asks questions and

pauses for a response (e.g., "How do you think Blue feels?"). By adding the audience into a conversation, the media transforms the child from a passive viewer into an active learner. Research suggests this promotes a stronger parasocial interaction, a one-sided relationship where a child feels a real bond with a media figure (Calvert et al., 2007). In the context of SEL, this bond is educationally important. When a character looks at the camera and asks questions or labels a feeling, it forces the child to think critically, self-reflect and rehearse the skill in real-time. This active participation creates a learning environment that third-person narratives cannot replicate, as they leave the child as an observer rather than a participant in the dialogue.

In contrast, shows like *Bluey* (2018), *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), and *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023) uses a third-person narrative. While this format allows for complex storytelling, it can create an emotional distance. Without the direct prompt to reflect (e.g. How would *you* handle this?), the transfer of the social skills relies entirely on the child's ability to independently understand the intended SEL skills, a cognitive gap that may be difficult for younger preschoolers without adult guidance.

### ***The Role of the Mentor Giving SEL***

One important finding is the guidance of the emotional lesson. In SEL-focused programs, SEL instruction is scaffolded, meaning it is communicated from a calm, caring adult figure down to a child or a younger character receiving the SEL. This dynamic is clear in *Doc McStuffins* (2012), *Handy Manny* (2006), *Carl the Collector* (2024), as well as *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012). In these narratives, the main characters (Doc, Manny, Carl's mom, Teacher Harriet) effectively function as emotional regulators.

When a toy in *Doc McStuffins* (2012) or a tool in *Handy Manny* (2006) becomes overwhelmed by fear or anxiety, they do not resolve it alone; the mentor figure steps in to label the feeling and guide them toward a solution. I understood from my analysis that in peer-driven narratives, characters experience less guidance, sometimes just a hint from an adult figure or nothing at all. Therefore, their internal conversation pushes them toward a solution. This may help children understand the solution and work toward the outcome.

### ***The Role of Peer Giving SEL***

Another way of giving SEL lessons to children other than from adults or mentors is the use of peers giving SEL, where the social or emotional lesson is delivered by a child character. This choice of messenger is important because it changes how the audience receives the lesson. When an adult character delivers a message, such as telling a child to be kind or to share, it might often feel like a rule or a command from an authority figure. However, when a peer character demonstrates these skills, the dynamic shifts from instruction to modeling. Children are more likely to imitate the behavior of someone they relate to (Bandura, 1977). When children watch a character who looks and acts like them successfully manage a conflict or a scary emotion, the lesson feels more acceptable.

This strategy teaches children they have agency. If children's media consistently shows adults stepping in to fix fights or solve emotional problems, young viewers might learn that emotional regulation is an adult job and that they must wait for a grown-up to step in and fix the problem. In contrast, the narrative allows characters like *Doc McStuffins* (2012) or the *Work it Out Wombats* (2023) to resolve their own obstacles. It can empower the viewer to take initiative.

This strategy can send a message that children do not have to wait for an adult to intervene; they have the capability to calm themselves down, apologize, and support their friends independently.

### ***Pacing as a Tool***

Finally, the pacing of the narrative acts as a regulator for emotional processing. Shows prioritizing explicit instruction – most notably *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) and *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) – often use a deliberately slower pace, using extended pauses and slower dialogue. This is a deliberate choice as well as a helpful cognitive necessity; emotional regulation is a complex function that requires time to process (Fisch et al, 2000). Slower narratives provide the mental capacity for a child to identify an emotion and internalize the corresponding lesson.

In contrast, shows designed to mimic the energy of real-life play such as *Bluey* (2018) and *Lyla in the Loop* (2024) often use faster pace and dialogue. While this succeeds in maintaining high engagement, it presents a risk of cognitive overstimulation regarding SEL. If a conflict is resolved with humor or a fast-paced action sequence, the teachable moment may pass before the child has recognized it. Therefore, while faster pacing drives entertainment value, slower pacing appears to be a necessity for the deep processing required for explicit SEL messaging.

### ***Diversity Inclusion and Representation***

First, I want to point out that diversity and inclusion were well-represented in all the shows in my sample. Every episode had some level of diversity, inclusion and representation. Diversity is expressed by casting, cultural cues, family structures, linguistic differences, and

diverse abilities. The abundance of diversity in my sample shows a clear, intentional shift in the industry. My analysis found that while in the past, diversity and inclusion might have been represented by only a few characters or only in a few episodes, the current study demonstrated we can predict that in at least some of today's children's television programming, there are more diverse characters and they are shown more regularly. This is important because it means the industry is no longer asking *if* they should include diverse characters, but *how* to do it best. As a researcher, I see this as a sign that creators now understand their responsibility, and they are not just making entertainment; they are intentionally building a world in which all children can see themselves represented on screen.

Second, I argue that the ultimate goal of diversity is for it to sustain inclusivity in children's media to the point that we don't even have to talk about it. There is a debate in the field about whether we should explicitly teach children about differences or just show them a diverse world. My findings support the idea of standardization of a diverse social world and just showing diverse characters. In shows like *Doc McStuffin* (2012) and *Handy Manny* (2006) characters didn't constantly announce, "I am different!" Instead, they just exist together in a community that is filled with support and acceptance of the differences. When diversity is just a standard part of the background, it can help children build a worldview where different races, languages, and abilities are not strange things that need to be explained, but simply how the world is.

Finally, while my findings are positive about the inclusion of diversity in my sample which comes from popular children's media, I must look at the reality of the industry. We cannot assume this progress will last forever. Four shows in my sample are from PBS. PBS used to base

each show on extensive research and a designed curriculum. They relied on grants to fund this. However, in the current political climate at this writing, most of these grants have been cancelled, and the future of such programming is in question. This means that even though creators may want to make inclusive shows, they might struggle to find the money to do so. It is important to point out that the diversity we see on screen today is represented well but it is fragile. The portrayal of diversity is not yet deeply institutionalized; it can still be easily reversed if the media industry does not prioritize this shift. Institutionalizing this standard requires constant support, funding, and the deliberate care of content creators to ensure that diversity, inclusion, and representation continue to be depicted as the goal to sustain inclusive content on screen.

### ***Neurodiversity and Social Awareness***

The present study of samples of popular children's television shows demonstrates that children's media is changing with regard to how social awareness is presented, especially when it comes to neurodiversity. The inclusion of autistic characters, such as Carl in *Carl the Collector* (2024) and Max in *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), can shift social awareness from a message about being kind to a more specific lesson about understanding differences in how people think, feel, and experience the world.

These shows do more than simply include neurodiverse characters. They use everyday situations to show children how to interact respectfully and thoughtfully with friends who have different needs. When Daniel changes the way he plays to support Max's sensory preferences, or when Carl explains to Nico that his brain works differently, the shows give young viewers clear

examples of how to communicate, adjust behavior, and maintain friendships across differences. This moves social awareness beyond only empathy and towards a deeper understanding that people do not all respond to situations in the same way. This is an effort to normalize different ways of thinking, behaving, and presenting neurodiversity.

### **Clifford et al. Framework and Capacity Model**

To understand the differences in how SEL is presented and conveyed, it is necessary to examine the mechanics of how children process television. This study uses the Clifford et al., (1995) framework of narrative structure and Fisch's (2000) Capacity Model of limited working memory to analyze the integration of SEL messages I observed across the sample.

#### ***The Clifford et al. Framework: Structure & Schema***

The Clifford et al., (1995) framework posits that children rely on predictable schemas or scripts to understand a narrative. When a show follows a rigid, repetitive structure, it reduces the cognitive effort required to follow the plot, therefore freeing up brain capacity for learning. The SEL-focused shows in this study, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) and *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019), *Doc McStuffin* (2012), and *Carl the Collector* (2024) stick to a formalized schema. For instance, the episode "What Friends like" (Season 7, Episode 2) follows the program's identical sequence: an initial disruption (Daniel wants to give a high five to Katerina, she refuses which causes the initial conflict); the introduction of a strategy by a mentor (an adult figure steps in, Teacher Harriet asks what's happening and introduces the lesson: there are lots of different ways to greet someone, with a corresponding song ("Sometimes we like different things, it helps to ask what do you like"), the application of that strategy (Teacher Harriet makes a chart and shows

different ways to greet others and Daniel repeats the song and tries to apply the lesson, asking Katerina how she wants to be greeted); and a final resolution (Daniel greets his other classmates and asks how they would like to be greeted based on preferences). Because the viewer already knows the structure of the episode, they do not need to expend working memory figuring out "what happens next." Instead, their attention is fully available to process the specific lesson of the episode, in this case, what children's preferences are and how to ask what children feel comfortable with.

In contrast, learning-focused embedded SEL shows often lack this structural predictability. For example, *Bluey* (2018) may have a less rigid structure and give an SEL without making it a main story, and the structure can be varied from one episode to another. Some episodes have direct SEL messages to follow and others rely on non-verbal cues to follow the plot. While this variety makes the show more entertaining, it increases the cognitive load. The child must actively monitor the changing plot dynamics, leaving less cognitive capacity available to encode the underlying SEL message.

### ***The Capacity Model: Working Memory & Distance***

Fisch's Capacity Model (2000), argues that a child's working memory is limited. Effective educational content succeeds when the narrative distance (the gap between the story and the lesson) is minimized. As mentioned previously in the Capacity Model (2000), when there is zero distance between the story and the lesson, there is a higher effectiveness in learning the educational content. I saw this occur in *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012), *Doc McStuffins* (2012), *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019), and *Carl the Collector* (2024). In these shows, the educational content is the narrative. If the lesson is about communication, the entire plot consists

of characters learning relationship skills and understanding how to use their words and communicate with their peers effectively. An example is Carl communicating with his friends about the misunderstanding and that he needs more time to process things. The lesson of the plot is about communication and so if the narrative (Season 1, Episode 13). The plot cannot be understood without understanding the lesson. As Fisch (2000) argues, processing the narrative and processing the education become simultaneous in the working memory.

In contrast, greater distance between the story and the lesson means there is a lower effectiveness in retaining the information. In many learning-focused shows with embedded SEL, the SEL lesson is tangential to the plot. For example, in an episode of *Lyla in the Loop* (2024) focused on making a carnival at home (cognitive goal), a moment of frustration (SEL goal) may occur. However, the primary narrative plot is figuring out how to construct the carnival games, not the emotional regulation that comes with the process. The child's working memory is prioritized toward mechanical problem-solving, pushing the emotional lesson to the side. In these cases, the narrative competes with the educational content for limited working memory, often resulting in the SEL lesson being missed or not fully understood.

### ***Pacing & Comprehension***

Finally, according to Fisch (2000), the pacing of the narrative acts as a regulator for emotional processing, because television is not a self-paced medium; viewers cannot control the speed of incoming information or pause to review what they missed (Eckhardt et al., 1991). Shows prioritizing explicit instruction, such as programs like *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012) and *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019), often have a deliberately slower pace, using extended pauses and slower dialogue. This is an intentional choice and is needed for comprehension,

because emotional regulation is a complex function that requires time to process. By slowing down the delivery of information, these shows reduce the cognitive demands of the narrative, thereby freeing up working memory storage in order to take in the educational content. This approach mirrors the educational philosophy of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968). *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, which was created by Angela Santomero (also producer of *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019)) drew upon the Mister Rogers' approach to design the necessary time to process the narrative (Santomero, 2018). In contrast, shows designed to mimic the energy of real-life play, such as *Bluey* (2018) and *Lyla in the Loop* (2024), often use a faster pace and rapid dialogue. This may present a risk of cognitive overload regarding SEL. Young children have slower processing speeds than adults, a fast paced narrative can consume all available working memory.

## **Implications**

### ***Implications for Media Creators***

The results of this study suggest that media creators should prioritize children's SEL when developing content. The analysis demonstrated that content creators utilize a variety of methods such as specific plot structures and various characters, through which children can gain SEL skills like recognizing emotions, emotional regulation, understanding differences, communication, and ethical decision-making. Since children can learn by observing what characters do, creators should carefully consider how characters display emotions, interact with one another, and resolve problems. Small choices, such as showing a character pause to think, apologize, or perform an act of kindness, provides modeling for young viewers.

Furthermore, my analysis highlights how some popular children's television shows successfully balance entertainment and educational content, a balance supported by the Capacity Model (Fisch, 2000). By using strategies such as predictable story schemas, clear verbal and non-verbal cues, appropriate narrative complexity, rigid structure, and deliberate pacing, creators can reduce cognitive load and use children's working memory efficiently. This suggests that future content creators can apply these same strategies to make their shows more accessible, making sure that the distance between the narrative and the lesson remains small, therefore making it easier for children to process SEL concepts.

For creators developing learning-focused shows (such as those teaching computational thinking) or entertainment driven content, this study suggests they can still deliver SEL messages more effectively even when SEL is not the main curriculum goal. For example, by slowing the pacing of the scene when an emotional lesson is conveyed, creators can help children better process the SEL message. Finally, while this analysis confirmed the successful integration of diversity, inclusion, and representation in current popular SEL rich media, content creators should try to make diversity an integral, structural part of their content. By embedding representation deeply into the story of a show, these inclusive narratives become more resilient, making sure they remain a main focus even during times when production funding is limited.

### ***Implication for Parents and Caregivers***

My findings of this study suggest that children's shows can be a helpful tool for teaching emotions, problem-solving, and understanding differences. Parents and educators can use what children see in these programs to support conversations about feelings and social situations. When characters name their emotions, feel unsure, or work through misunderstandings, adults

can help point these moments out and explain what is happening to guide them to make meaning. This may help children learn how to recognize their own feelings and how to respond to others.

Similarly, the study showed that many programs include characters from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Parents and teachers can use these moments to help children understand that people may communicate, think, or experience things differently. When adults highlight these examples, it can teach children to be more patient, accepting, and inclusive. This underscores the importance of educators, parents, or caregivers co-viewing shows with children, by pausing and explaining to discuss scenes. They can help children by clarifying the story schema, explaining verbal reasoning, and breaking down the complexity of the story. This may result in freeing children's working memory and helping them to understand SEL messages better and more efficiently.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study had a few limitations. First, the sample size was small. I analyzed only eight shows and three episodes from each show, which is not large enough to capture the full range of SEL content across all children's television. Because I analyzed only selected episodes from each show, I may have missed different lessons or portrayals and they therefore are not reflected in my results. Second, the shows were selected based on ratings from Common Sense Media and were all broadcast on three major networks. Children's television content is delivered through numerous platforms, including YouTube and other streaming services, which were not assessed in the present study. Although all eight studied shows were successful in conveying SEL messages, their observed outcomes may reflect shared narrative structures or pedagogical

approaches, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to children's television more broadly.

This analysis focused exclusively on children's television programming. However, children's media today and going forward will encompass a much broader range of additional platforms, including interactive apps, gaming environments, and AI-generated content. These formats can differ from traditional narrative television in their structure and goals. Future research should extend beyond television to analyze the SEL content and strategies within these evolving platforms to fully understand the diverse digital environment in which children are developing.

Finally, my findings rely on my own interpretation as the only researcher. I used the CASEL framework to guide my coding and conducted a trial run with additional coders to check inter-coder reliability, but I recognize that interpreting narratives always has a bias of subjectivity. Another researcher might focus on different moments, emphasize different interactions, or categorize certain behaviors differently. While I worked carefully to remain consistent and transparent, in defining the SEL definitions, the results reflect only my perspective and judgment

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

A major limitation of this study, and much of the research in this field, is that it relies primarily on an adult's interpretation. As the researcher, I watched these episodes and identified SEL themes based on academic definitions and my own understanding of the world. However, children do not view media through an academic lens. What I code as a lesson on "relationship

skills" might just look like humor and a passing moment with no underlying SEL message to the child. Therefore, a critical next step for future research is to move beyond content analysis and directly involve the children themselves. Researchers need to interview young viewers to ask them, "What do you think this story was about?" or "How did that character make you feel?" Ultimately we need to include child perspectives in the production process in order to understand children's perspectives.

There are several other important ways future research can build on this study. Future research could interview content creators such as writers, producers, and filmmakers to better understand how SEL lessons are designed, why certain choices are made, and what goals guide the storytelling process. This would add an inside perspective that I could not capture by only analyzing episodes. In addition, we can compare content creators' answers with this study's results to check for any overlapping patterns. Future research could also take a closer look at diversity and representation within SEL. While my study included these themes, a separate project could focus specifically on how shows teach children about cultural differences, language, disability, and neurodivergence, and whether these lessons appear consistently.

Another direction for future research is to analyze a larger sample of shows and many more episodes. A broader dataset would help determine whether the patterns I found stay the same across different networks, seasons, and genres, or whether SEL strategies vary more widely. Future research should also consider cross-cultural comparisons, since my study focused mostly on Western programs from the U.S., and Australia. SEL messages may look very different in shows from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East, where cultural norms around social and emotional relationships differ.

Future research could involve talking to children and families who identify with the Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) groups shown on screen to understand whether they feel represented and whether the portrayals feel accurate and meaningful in their own lives. Together, these directions would help future research build a fuller and more complete picture of how SEL is created, represented, and understood in children's media.

Finally, it is important to note that this study was a content analysis; it examined what is being presented to children, not how it affects them. Future research can address the effects component of the children's media. While we now understand the narrative strategies used to convey these lessons, we need experimental and longitudinal studies to determine if exposure to these specific techniques translates into tangible improvements in children's real-world social and emotional competence.

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## Appendix A: Program Descriptions and Episode Synopses

### *Handy Manny (2006–2013)*

*Handy Manny (2006)* is an animated preschool television series that premiered on Disney Channel's Playhouse Disney block and continued airing on Disney Junior. The show follows Manny Garcia, a cheerful and skilled handyman who lives in the diverse community of Sheet Rock Hills. With the help of his animated talking tools including Felipe the screwdriver, Turner the wrench, Stretch the tape measure, Pat the hammer, and others, Manny travels around town repairing broken objects and assisting neighbors with everyday problems. Each episode combines humor, teamwork, and bilingual dialogue in both English and Spanish, reflecting Manny's Latino heritage and introducing young viewers to basic Spanish vocabulary and cultural appreciation. Through its colorful animation, upbeat music, and recurring community themes, *Handy Manny (2006)* teaches young children about cooperation, respect, and helping others, all while showing the importance of kindness, communication, and diversity in everyday life.

*Handy Manny (2006)* received consistently positive reviews from parents, educators, and critics for its bilingual format, educational value, and uplifting community-centered themes. The series was widely praised for its ability to blend English and Spanish dialogue in a way that helps preschoolers expand their vocabulary while learning about cooperation, patience, and respect. According to Common Sense Media (n.d.-a), which awarded the show four out of five stars, *Handy Manny (2006)* delivers "strong messages about teamwork, problem-solving, and a positive attitude" and features "community-minded residents of a culturally diverse town who are always respectful to each other and appreciative of individuals' special talents." Parents also echoed these sentiments, noting that the show "teaches good manners and patience" and

“encourages helping others out.” Other parent reviewers celebrated its multicultural and educational approach, writing, “Great show, teaches Spanish, problem-solving, and how to be a great friend,” and “Love the show’s diversity” (Common Sense Media, n.d.-f). Similarly, a reviewer on IMDb (n.d.-f) described the program as “a great cultural bridge and understandable on a preschooler’s level,” emphasizing that it “shows Manny, a self-deprecating character who enjoys all around him,” and commending it for offering “diversity and positive images of several different cultures.” Through its engaging storytelling, gentle humor, and emphasis on inclusion, *Handy Manny (2006)* stands out as a model of how children’s programming can combine entertainment with meaningful lessons about kindness, community, and cultural appreciation.

*Handy Manny (2006)* earned several awards and nominations over the years for the show’s educational and cultural diversity. The show won the Environmental Media Award (2008) and the Vision Award for Animation (2008) for promoting positive environmental and social messages. It was also nominated for a Daytime Emmy Award (2009) for Outstanding Special Class Animated Program. In total, the series received eight wins and three nominations, showing how it was appreciated for teaching teamwork, problem-solving, and cultural pride in a way that resonated with both kids and parents (IMDb, n.d.-e; TV Guide, n.d.).

Selected episodes of *Handy Manny (2006)*

“Have a Handy New Year” (Season 2, Episode 25): Manny and his tools prepare for the town’s New Year celebration while Mr. Lopart feels sad because his mother’s flight was canceled. Seeing how lonely Mr. Lopart is, Manny invites him to help with the town’s decorations. Although Mr. Lopart’s efforts to help lead to several accidents, Manny and the tools respond with patience and teamwork, fixing everything together and trying to lift Mr. Lopart’s

spirits. In the end, Mr. Lopart's mother arrives just in time, and the community celebrates. The main themes are lessons about inclusion, problem-solving, and caring for others.

“Rusty’s Little Light Lie” (Season 1, Episode 6): The mayor of the town asks Manny and the tools to help set up lights for the theater’s grand opening. Rusty, the orange wrench, accidentally breaks all the lightbulbs while trying to be helpful. Feeling embarrassed and worried that Manny and the tools will be upset, he decides to keep it a secret. As time passes, Rusty’s guilt starts to bother him until he finally pulls Manny aside and admits what happened. Manny reminds him that honesty is always the best choice and that mistakes are part of learning. The mayor, Manny, and the other tools show empathy and understanding toward Rusty.

“Chico Goes to Preschool” (Season 3, Episode 14): Manny’s nephew, Chico, is preparing for his first day of preschool. Manny and the tools help him get ready and try to ease his worries. Chico feels anxious about being away from his mother and nervous about meeting new friends, so Manny and the tools give him a lunchbox to encourage him to go. Once he arrives, he realizes he doesn’t have a place to put his lunchbox and feels sad, so Manny and the tools build a cubby just for him. With the support and encouragement from the teacher, Chico’s mother, and Manny and the tools, Chico learns to understand his feelings and gain confidence about starting something new. By the end, he happily waves goodbye with excitement to begin his first day of preschool.

### *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood (2012)-Present*

*Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood (2012)* is an animated children’s series inspired by *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood (1968)*, mainly centering on Daniel Tiger, a curious and kind preschooler

who lives with his family in the Neighborhood of Make Believe. Each episode begins with Daniel facing a common childhood situation like learning to share, feeling jealous, or visiting the doctor, and follows him as he talks, sings, and plays his way toward understanding what he's feeling. Daniel sings catchy songs that provide comforting strategies that children can remember and use in their own lives; one example is "When you feel so mad that you want to roar, take a deep breath and count to four." Through the animation and gentle storytelling, the show demonstrates Fred Rogers' original idea: that every child's emotions and experiences matter, and that kindness and empathy can be taught one song at a time.

Common Sense Media (n.d.-d) awarded *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (2012)* a five-star rating, for the show's thoughtful storytelling and emotional guidance for young viewers. The review explains that the series encourages preschoolers to reflect on everyday challenges, such as managing frustration or handling minor conflicts, and models coping strategies. The review also highlights how Daniel's experiences show children that life is not always perfect, but that patience and supportive adults can help them navigate difficult moments. These elements mark the show's commitment to building empathy, communication skills, and cooperation (Common Sense Media, n.d.-d). Parent feedback strongly echoes these observations, marking the show's value in real family settings. Many caregivers report that *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (2012)* provides accessible language and tools for discussing feelings with toddlers, and that this has had a positive effect on their children's emotional development (Common Sense Media, n.d.-d). Others appreciate the program's warm tone, memorable songs, and clear moral and practical lessons that children can easily apply at home. Additionally, parents describe how their children use the show's musical strategies to help regulate emotions during challenging moments, and

how adults often rely on those same songs to guide children through day-to-day situations (Common Sense Media, n.d.-d). A more recent parent review adds that the show helps create a consistent emotional framework at home. This parent noted that Daniel's routines and predictable structure make it easier for young children to understand expectations, transitions, and problem-solving steps (Common Sense Media, n.d.-d).

*Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (2012)* has received industry recognition. The series won Silver Parents' Choice Awards in both 2013 and 2014, and it was nominated for the Television Critics Association's Award for Outstanding Achievement in Youth Programming in those same years. It was also selected for the 2014 Prix Jeunesse International, reflecting its global appeal and educational value. Most notably, in 2019 the show won the Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Preschool Children's Animated Program (IMDb, n.d.-c).

Selected episodes of *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (2012)*

"Daniel's New Friend Max" (Season 5, Episode 14): Daniel meets Max, Teacher Harriet's nephew, who is on the autism spectrum. Max experiences sounds, textures, and interactions differently, which confuses Daniel. Daniel wants to play with Max and does not understand why Max is not responding to him. Teacher Harriet explains to Daniel that Max's experiences are different from how Daniel wants to play. Daniel learns that Max needs more time to get comfortable and space to play in his own way. With support from Teacher Harriet, Daniel learns to recognize and respect individual differences, understanding that people have unique ways of engaging with the world.

“What Friends Like” (Season 7, Episode 2): Daniel learns that his friends don’t always enjoy the same things he does. After Katerina Kittykat turns down his offer for a high five, Daniel feels confused and disappointed. Teacher Harriet helps Daniel understand and he learns that everyone has different preferences and that respecting those differences is part of being a good friend. In the end, Daniel and Katerina find their own way to connect, showing that friendship means understanding and kindness.

“Jodi’s Asthma” (Season 5, Episode 12): Daniel and his friends are playing Splat Ball in the Enchanted Garden when Jodi starts to have trouble keeping up because of her asthma. She needs to take a break to catch her breath, and Daniel notices she’s feeling left out. Wanting everyone to be included, he thinks of a new game they can play while sitting down. This way, Jodi can rest and still be part of the fun with her friends.

*Doc McStuffins (2012–2020)*

*Doc McStuffins (2012)* follows a six-year-old girl named Dottie “Doc” McStuffins who can magically communicate with her toys and stuffed animals. She runs her own playhouse clinic where she helps her stuffed animals feel better. Each episode begins with a toy patient in distress or discomfort, normally broken, worried, or sick; Doc uses her stethoscope, her checklist, and her empathy to make a diagnosis and offer gentle advice. She is surrounded by her toy helpers Lambie, Stuffy, Hallie, and Chilly. Doc models care, compassion, and problem-solving as she listens carefully and reassures her patients. The series uses imaginative play to introduce children to concepts of health, hygiene, emotional regulation, and kindness while encouraging positive messages about diversity and self-confidence.

Parent reviews on *Doc McStuffins (2012)* mainly highlight the show's warmth, educational value, and emotional comfort for young children (Common Sense Media, n.d.-e). Many caregivers describe the series as very positive for "little ones," noting that it teaches children how to help others, introduces simple problem-solving steps, and offers reassuring guidance that even adults find useful in their own daily lives (Common Sense Media, n.d.-e). Parents also report that the show's songs and medical scenarios encourage imaginative play; for example, some children carry the show's routines into pretend doctor visits at home, forming connections between Doc's supportive approach and their real-life health experiences (Common Sense Media, n.d.-e). Overall, parents characterize *Doc McStuffins (2012)* as a program that promotes compassion, kindness, and age-appropriate understanding of doctor visits (Common Sense Media, n.d.-e). Several other reviewers mention the show helps ease children's medical anxiety: one parent explained that referencing comforting moments from the series, such as characters offering hugs or calm reassurance, helped soothe her child during an actual doctor's appointment. Reviewers are pleased with the show's focus on caring for others, problem-solving, and encouraging independence as Doc confidently "treats" her toys through simple, understandable actions like mending seams or replacing batteries. The series also offers meaningful representation by centering an African American family and modeling equitable, nontraditional gender roles.

The series earned multiple nominations early on, including a 2013 British Academy Children's Award and additional BAFTA nominations in 2014, 2018, and 2019 for, International Preschool, and International Animation categories. It was also nominated for a Daytime Emmy Award in 2019 for Outstanding Writing in a Preschool Animated Program and again in 2020 for

Outstanding Preschool Children's Animated Series. Beyond these nominations, the show has achieved several significant wins: it received the Kidscreen Award for Best Animated Series in 2016, the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Children's Program in 2015, and the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Animated Series in 2021. The series also earned a Peabody Award in 2014, recognizing its meaningful cultural and educational contribution. Collectively, these honors underscore the show's wide-reaching impact, its cultural relevance, and its strong standing within children's educational programming (IMDb, n.d.-d).

Selected episodes for *Doc Mcstuffins* (2012):

“Night Night, Lala” (Season 3, Episode 26): a new toy named Lala arrives at Doc's clinic and feels nervous when bedtime comes. Because she's new, she doesn't know the usual nighttime routine or what happens after the lights are turned off, which makes her scared. Doc and her toy friends gently explain the bedtime steps and help her feel safe and included. By the end, Lala relaxes and drifts off to sleep, learning that new places aren't so scary once you feel at home.

“Cece's First Bath” (Season 4, Episode 7): Doc wants to give her baby doll, Cece, her first bath. Since Cece can't talk, she wiggles and fusses, showing she's nervous about the water and trying something unfamiliar. Doc diagnoses Cece with “First Bath-itis,” which means being scared of doing something for the first time. With the help of her toy friends, Doc explains each step to comfort Cece, and helps her feel safe as she slowly gets used to the water.

“The Big Sleepover” (Season 2, Episode 13): Doc goes to Emmie and Alma's house for her very first sleepover. She's allowed to bring two toys, and when she picks Lambie and Stuffie,

Chilly feels left out and worries about being apart from her. Once the sleepover starts, Doc begins to feel homesick. Emmie and Alma help lift her spirits by singing a song, reminding her that she's loved and making her feel comfortable.

### *Bluey (2018)-Pres*

*Bluey (2018)* is an Australian animated children's series that premiered on ABC Kids and airs internationally on Disney Junior and Disney Plus. *Bluey (2018)* is a series that follows the everyday adventures of a six-year-old Blue Heeler puppy named Bluey, who lives with her parents, Bandit and Chilli, and her younger sister, Bingo. Set in suburban Australia, the show illustrates ordinary family routines, such as getting ready for school, visiting grandparents, and playing in the backyard, that Bluey transforms into imaginative, open-ended games. Each episode captures the humor, problem-solving, and learning moments that appear through play, showing how Bluey and Bingo explore empathy, creativity, and resilience with guidance from their loving parents. The series is known for its warm portrayal of family life, its child-centered humor, and its ability to reflect both the happiness and challenges of growing up.

Many parents say that *Bluey (2018)* is one of the few kids' shows that truly entertains both children and adults. They often mention how the show's humor, warmth, and gentle life lessons make it perfect for family viewing. One parent explained that their two young children actually laugh out loud during the episodes, something that doesn't happen with most other shows. They also appreciated how *Bluey (2018)* balances fun, light-hearted moments with more emotional ones, like coping with the death of a pet budgie or dealing with hurt feelings when play gets too rough. Even with these heavier topics, their kids still rewatch the episodes, which

suggests the show handles sensitive themes in a way young children can understand and feel comfortable watching.

Common Sense Media shares similar observations. They highlight how *Bluey (2018)* encourages imaginative play, turn-taking, patience, and other early social skills, all shown through the everyday adventures of an Australian puppy family. They also point out how the parents in the show are especially supportive and engaged, modeling playful, responsive, and emotionally aware parenting (Common Sense Media, n.d.-b).

*Bluey (2018)* has been recognized through a number of significant awards, showing its contribution to contemporary children's media. The series has received honors such as the Logie Award for Most Outstanding Children's Program, the International Emmy Kids Award, the AACTA Award for Best Children's Program, the TCA Award for Outstanding Achievement, and the Peabody Award, Children & Youth (2024). Alongside these achievements, *Bluey (2018)* has been repeatedly nominated for the International Emmy Awards, the Critics' Choice Television Awards, the TCA Awards, the AACTA Awards, and the Logie Awards, showing consistent recognition across multiple years. (IMDb n.d-b).

Selected episodes for *Bluey (2018)*:

“Camping” (Season 1, episode 43): Bluey and her family go on a camping trip. Bluey meets Jean-Luc, a boy who speaks French. The two are unable to communicate due to the language barrier, yet they form a strong friendship through play, imagination, and shared curiosity about nature. When Jean-Luc leaves unexpectedly, Bluey experiences sadness but also learns to reflect on her feelings and cherish the memory of their time together.

“Duck Cake” (Season 2, Episode 43): Bluey and her Dad are making a special duck-shaped cake for her sister Bingo’s birthday, and Dad takes on the challenge. Bluey wants to help, but first she’s told she must clean up her and Bingo's toys, which she doesn’t want to do. When Dad accidentally drops the cake, Bluey sees how upset he is and realizes that helping is important, so she steps in and cleans up the entire mess and even tidies her toys too.

“Road Trip “(Season 2, Episode 41): Bluey and her family head out for a long road trip to visit their cousins. From the beginning, Bluey feels bored and wishes she had her tablet to keep her busy. With help from Mum, Dad, and Bingo, she finds new ways to have fun by using her imagination and noticing the world around her. By the end of the trip, Bluey and Bingo realize they don’t need their tablet to have a good time, learning lessons about patience, imagination, and enjoying the moment.

#### *Blue’s Clues & You! (2019)-Present*

*Blue’s Clues & You! (2019)* is an interactive preschool television show that invites young children to help solve playful mysteries alongside Blue, an animated puppy, and her human friend, Josh. Each episode begins with Blue leaving a trail of three paw-print clues for viewers to find, then Josh leading the audience through a series of games, songs, and problem-solving moments inside their colorful house. Children are encouraged to think, respond, and participate as the story unfolds because Josh takes long pauses and interacts, which reinforces patterns of curiosity and observation. *Blue’s Clues & You! (2019)* is a revival of the 1996 original *Blue’s Clues*. The series kept its signature call-and-response style while introducing modern visuals and inclusive storylines. The show’s premise using clues to discover what Blue wants creates a

consistent and comforting rhythm that keeps young children engaged and learning through discovery.

Parents and caregivers positively critiqued the strong educational and developmental impact of *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) on very young children. One reviewer describes watching their 14-month-old niece rapidly expand her vocabulary and even use ASL, due to the show's interactive songs, dances, and communication cues. The reviewers acknowledge Josh's strengths as a host, particularly his Broadway-trained singing, dancing, and storytelling, which help keep babies, toddlers, and even adults engaged. The familiar appearances of Steve and Joe further speak to intergenerational enjoyment, making the show appealing for both nostalgic "big kids" and new viewers. Common Sense Media's review notes that the reboot maintains the original series' high educational value, demonstrating literacy skills such as phonics, spelling, and letter recognition, as well as foundational preschool concepts like shapes and colors. The show's uses puzzles and audience participation to build critical thinking and curiosity, in addition to social emotional themes that help children explore feelings and understand cultural traditions. Lastly, Josh's role as the first non-white host, Filipino American, is an example of the show's approach to diverse representation. (Common Sense Media n.d.-a).

*Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) has received recognition across major children's media awards since its premiere for both its creative quality and its continued cultural relevance. In 2020, the series received multiple nominations at the 47th Daytime Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Preschool Children's Series and Outstanding Interactive Media for a Daytime Program. That same year, it was also nominated for Best Preschool Series at the Cynopsis Best of the Best Awards and for Best Mixed Media Series at the Kidscreen Awards. In 2021, the show

continued to receive nominations at the 48th Daytime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Writing and Outstanding Directing for a Preschool, Children's, or Family Viewing Program, as well as a nomination for Outstanding Animated Series at the 4th Annual Emmys. More recently, the series was nominated for Outstanding Preschool Series at the 2nd Children's and Family Emmy Awards in 2023 and for Best Children or Family Series at the 2024 Astra TV Awards. Notably, *Blue's Clues & You!* (2019) won its first major award in 2025, receiving the Outstanding Preschool Series at the 3rd Children's and Family Emmy Awards (IMDb. n.d.-a)

Sample episodes of *Blues Clues and You!*

“Sad Day with Blue” (Season 1, Episode 6): Josh notices that Blue isn't her usual happy self, he realizes something is bothering her. With help from the viewers, Josh looks for clues to figure out what's making Blue sad. Josh and the audience learn that Magenta accidentally knocked over Blue's block tower during playtime. Blue looked upset and did not know how to talk about it, but once Blue and Magenta shared their feelings and said sorry, they both felt better.

“Hide and Seek with Blue” (Season 2, Episode 9): Blue and Josh play a fun game of hide and seek, and Blue leaves clues to help Josh and the viewers figure out where she's hiding. As they play, Josh carefully looks for hints, listens closely, and uses problem-solving skills to track her down.

“Blue's Bistro” (Season 3, Episode 3): Blue and Josh open their very own restaurant called *Blue's Bistro!* Together, they take orders from their friends, prepare pretend meals, and make sure everyone gets what they asked for.

*Work It Out Wombats! (2023)*

*Work It Out Wombats! (2023)* premiered on PBS KIDS and follows three wombat siblings Malik, Zadie, and Zeke who live with their grandmother, Super, in a vibrant treehouse community called the Treeborhood. Created by Marcy Gunther, Robby Hoffman, Kathy Waugh and Marisa Wolsky and produced by GBH Kids and Pipeline Studios, the series centers on the siblings as they explore their world, build inventions, and solve everyday problems together. Each story begins with a challenge that the wombats “work out” using creativity, communication, and teamwork. The show’s colorful animation, warm humor, and focus on cooperation make it a joyful portrayal of family life and neighborhood friendships, appealing to both preschoolers and their families.

Parents and reviewers describe *Work It Out Wombats! (2023)* as a fun, educational preschool show that helps young children learn early computational thinking through playful stories. Common Sense Media explains that the series follows three lively marsupial siblings whose adventures encourage problem-solving, curiosity, and teamwork, all while introducing basic STEM and computer science ideas. Reviewers also appreciate the show’s thoughtful approach to representation. The animal characters aren’t tied to traditional gender stereotypes, as their shapes, sizes, and colors don’t signal gender, helping create a more open and inclusive world. The show also pushes back against age and gender expectations through characters like Super, a warm and capable grandmother who carries a toolkit, helps lead the Treeborhood, and shows independence and confidence. Many families and critics also praise the show’s diverse family structures and inclusive casting, with voice actors from Black, Asian, and Indian backgrounds. *Work It Out Wombats! (2023)* has also gained industry recognition, including a

2024 GLAAD Media Award nomination for Outstanding Children's Programming (IMDb, n.d.-g)

Selected episodes of *Work It Out Wombats!* (2023):

“The Sleepover” (Season 1, Episode 9), Zeke goes to a sleepover with Leiko and Snout. He's excited at first, however Zeke feels uneasy when he discovers that Leiko's bedtime routine is nothing like his own, there's no bath, no bedtime story, and everyone sleeps in hammocks. Missing his usual comforts, Zeke wants to go home because he's homesick, but with encouragement from his friends, he decides to stay and ends up enjoying the new experience.

“Snout and About” (Season 1, Episode 1): Zeke wakes up excited for what he believes is pancake day but quickly realizes that his favorite stuffed-animal friend, Snout, is missing from his bed. He immediately tells his older siblings, Malik and Zadie, and together, with support from their grandmother, they decide to search for Snout. The siblings retrace Zeke's entire bedtime routine, checking the story, pajamas, bath, and goodnight song to determine where Snout was last seen. When Snout is not found in any of these places, they remember the final step of the routine: turning on the closet light before bed. Opening the closet door, they find Snout inside. The family finishes their search and celebrates their success with pancakes.

“The Big Loud Storm” (Season 2 Episode 1): A storm hits the Treeborhood, and Zeke becomes frightened by the loud thunder, leading him to hide in the closet. Malik and Zadie quickly realize that their younger brother is scared, and they begin brainstorming ways to comfort him. Together, they experiment with making sound-proof earmuffs, padding the door with pillows, and creating a special headband designed to reduce noise. They also offer the noise

reducing headband to other neighbors who might be scared by the storm. Although Malik and Zadie were not initially scared, a sudden burst of thunder startles them, and Zeke kindly places the earmuffs on both siblings, showing empathy and support.

*Lyla in the Loop (2024)*

*Lyla in the Loop (2024)*, is a PBS KIDS animated series produced by Mighty Picnic and Pipeline Studios. The show follows seven-year-old African American Lyla, an energetic and inventive girl who lives with her family in a lively urban neighborhood filled with colorful characters and creative opportunities. With her sidekick, Stu, Lyla approaches everyday challenges like fixing something broken or organizing a community event with curiosity and determination. She experiments, makes mistakes, and tries again until she finds a solution, modeling persistence and teamwork along the way. Through its upbeat storytelling and relatable situations, the series celebrates curiosity, resourcefulness, and the importance of learning from trial and error in the world around us.

Parents and caregivers describe *Lyla in the Loop (2024)* as a fun, funny, and STEM-centered show that provides strong representation and real educational value. One reviewer said it was refreshing to see an African-American family on PBS portrayed positively, without stereotypes, and shared that their nine year-old nephew loves the show. They also noted that the humor and problem-solving make it enjoyable for adults too. Reviewers appreciate how Lyla often starts an episode leaning on Stu, but eventually learns to slow down, think things through, and solve multi-step problems on her own, modeling persistence, focus, and self-regulation for kids. Reflecting these positive impressions, Common Sense Media gave the series a four-star

rating and described it as upbeat, inventive, and heavy in STEM learning (Common Sense Media, n.d.-g).

*Lyla in the Loop (2024)* has earned significant recognition for its educational quality and innovative digital content. It was named one of Common Sense Media's Best TV Series of 2024 for children ages 5–7. It received a 2025 Excellence in Early Learning Digital Media Honor from the Association for Library Service to Children. The show's interactive feature, *Stu's Super Stunts*, earned a 2025 Emmy nomination for Outstanding Interactive Media. PBS KIDS' social media campaign for the series won the 2025 Webby Awards People's Voice Winner in the Kids & Family Social category, while its podcast, *Lyla's Loopcast*, was honored as a 2025 Gold Winner for Best Kid's Show by the Signal Awards. Additionally, the episode *Lyla and Stu's Hairdos* was recognized as a 2025 Webby Honoree in the AI, Immersive & Games for Kids & Family category (Mighty Picnic LLC, n.d.).

Selected episodes for *Lyla in the Loop (2024)*:

“How the Cookie Crumbled” (Season 1, Episode 9): Lyla wants to bring her mom's famous cookies for her school snack duty, but Lyla and her mom realize they don't have all the ingredients they need. Lyla's twin older sisters offer to take her to the store. With the store about to close and no way to get everything in time, Lyla and her siblings decide to substitute by choosing ingredients they already have at home. They experiment with different combinations and eventually create a trail-mix version that tastes different than the cookie but is still delicious. By being flexible and working together, they come up with a creative solution that still meets Lyla's goal.

“Lemonade Champs” (Season 2, Episode 1): Lyla and Everett set up a lemonade stand to raise money for the Meow Town animal shelter. Their first day is successful because the weather is sunny and many neighbors stop by. However, the next day it starts to rain and almost no customers show, leaving Lyla and Everett confused and discouraged. With guidance from Lyla’s older twin sister, they begin using the “Lemonade Champs (program the used in the show)” to track both the weather and their daily sales so they can better plan for the future. Lyla and Everett start noticing clear patterns in how weather affects customer turnout, and they use this information to decide how many pitchers of lemonade to prepare on sunny versus rainy days. By making thoughtful, clear, and informed decisions and working collaboratively, they ultimately reach their fundraising goal for the animal shelter.

“Carnival for Luke” (Season 1, Episode 4): Luke feels sad after his class trip to the carnival is canceled. Seeing how disappointed he is, Lyla and her siblings decide to cheer him up by creating a homemade carnival using recycled and household materials. They work together to design games, problem-solve when things don’t work, and set up a fun surprise in the backyard. Luke is happy when he sees what his siblings have made for him.

*Carl the Collector (2024–present)*

*Carl the Collector (2024)* is an American animated series that premiered on PBS KIDS. Created by Zachariah O’Hora and produced by Fuzzytown Productions, it is PBS’s first show to feature a lead character with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. The series centers on Carl, a young raccoon who loves collecting interesting items like rocks, buttons, and shiny trinkets, and his adventures with his friends in the friendly town of Fuzzytown. Each episode follows Carl as he goes through new adventures, sorts through his collections, discovers new treasures, and learns

about friendship, sharing, and understanding others. The show's calm tone, gentle humor, and emphasis on inclusivity and neurodiversity make it a milestone in children's television, offering thoughtful representation for audiences of all abilities while celebrating the joy of curiosity and collecting.

Parents and reviewers describe *Carl the Collector* (2024) as a gentle, thoughtful series that offers strong educational and social emotional value for young children. Common Sense Media highlights how the show models positive problem-solving, empathy, and friendship skills through Carl and his friends in Fuzzytown (Common Sense Media, n.d.-c). Reviewers appreciate that the series includes two autistic characters, Carl and Lotta, who experience autism in different ways, but the show never labels them or makes their differences the focus. Instead, their personalities and strengths are simply part of everyday life. Behind the scenes, the production team includes neurodiverse writers, animators, voice actors, and advisers, adding authenticity and care to the storytelling. Families also value the show's broader representation: Forrest the squirrel has a tree nut allergy; Carl's parents are separated and he spends time with both; and characters of all genders are shown as kind, capable, and emotionally expressive, like Carl's best friend, Sheldon, a sensitive and supportive beaver. All of the characters are animals without implied race, which helps keep the world welcoming and inclusive. Parents say the series is wholesome, age-appropriate, and a great way to help kids learn about differences, feelings, and working together in a positive, supportive environment.

Sample episodes of *Carl the Collector* (2024)

“The Plushie Collection” (Season 1 Episode 1): Carl's plushie collection has grown so big that it's cluttering his room. With help from Sheldon and Forrest, he searches for ways to

organize them but can't find the right solution. After seeing Forrest bond with one of his plushies, Carl decides to give some away and takes photos to remember them before neatly arranging the rest.

“The Fall” (Season 1, Episode 13): Carl and his friends are flying kites when Nico (Carl's friend) trips and hurts her knee. Carl doesn't know how to react, which makes Nico think he doesn't care. Later, with the guidance of Carl's mom, he realizes his hesitation comes from being on the spectrum and struggling in unexpected moments. When Carl finally explains how he processes differently to Nico and apologizes, she forgives him, and together they learn the importance of understanding and empathy in friendship.

“A Collection to Get Rid Of” (Season 1 Episode 14): While Forrest was racing with his friends in the park, they stumbled over some trash. Seeing how messy the park is after a recent music festival, the friend group decides to clean it up together. Forrest treats the cleanup like a competition, while Carl focuses on recycling and organizing. More neighbors join in, and the park starts to look clean again.

## Appendix B - Coding categories

Table 1. Coding categories and their definition

	<b>Coding Category</b>	<b>Source/Definition</b>	<b>Coding Indicators (What to Look For)</b>
<b>I. Core SEL Competencies (CASEL Framework)</b>	1. Self-Awareness	Recognizing one's emotions, values, strengths, and challenges (CASEL).	Character explicitly names an emotion ("I feel sad" or "I am worried"); character acknowledges a personal strength or area for growth; character expresses a personal value or belief.
	2. Self-Management	Regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively (CASEL).	Character uses a coping strategy (deep breaths, counting, walking away); character persists through a difficult task; character sets and works toward a goal (e.g., getting a tool to fix an object).
	3. Social-Awareness	Understanding and empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds (CASEL).	Character recognizes and responds to another's visible emotion (e.g., seeing a friend is upset); character demonstrates perspective-taking; character discusses a difference in culture or experience (e.g., Daniel Tiger's new friend Max).
	4. Relationship Skills	Forming and maintaining positive relationships (CASEL).	Character offers help or receives help; characters collaborate on a task; character uses conflict resolution strategies (e.g., apology, compromise); character demonstrates friendship or teamwork (e.g., Bluey and Jean-Luc playing).
	5. Responsible Decision-Making	Making ethical and constructive choices about personal and social behavior (CASEL).	Character considers the consequences before acting; character chooses honesty over deceit (e.g., Handy Manny's Rusty admitting a mistake); character solves a social or environmental problem.
<b>II. Additional Themes</b>	1. Narrative Techniques	The structural elements used to convey SEL concepts to the audience.	Modeling: An adult character demonstrates the desired SEL skill; dialogue: explicit vs. implicit discussion or explanation of a feeling/skill (e.g., Doc McStuffins explaining a diagnosis); Song/Jingle: Use of a memorable song to teach a coping strategy (e.g., Daniel Tiger's songs).
	2. Diversity, Inclusion & Representation	Themes related to representation, cultural sensitivity, and equity.	Representation of diverse race, culture, or family structure; promotion of acceptance of neurodiversity (e.g., Carl the Collector or Daniel Tiger's Max); gender equity in roles or abilities; discussion of cultural traditions (e.g., Handy

			Manny using Spanish).
	3. Formal Features	Varied edits and visual design of characters, creating different formats through which emotions, actions, and SEL moments are displayed.	Live-action, humanlike animated characters, talking objects, and pacing of the show.