

TECHNICAL REPORT

The Shaping Us Framework



Developing a conceptual model
of social and emotional skills

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Acknowledgements

The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood was established in 2021 and is part of The Royal Foundation of The Prince and Princess of Wales.

The Centre's vision is of a healthier, happier and more nurturing world, transformed by our collective approach to early childhood. We work to achieve this by increasing awareness of – and action on – the extraordinary impact of early childhood. We translate compelling scientific advances to change what we all think and do for children between pregnancy and the age of five.



The Shaping Us Framework is a major part of driving change and will underpin a significant proportion of our work going forward. The framework took over a year to develop, made possible by responses to the Delphi study and language testing, as well as members of the Delphi Study advisory group:

- Lynn Ang PhD., Professor of Early Childhood Education, UCL Institute of Education, UK
- Marc Brackett PhD., Founding Director, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, US
- Katherine Jenkins MSc., Head of Family Support and Specialist Programmes, The Forward Trust, UK
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- Robert J. Waldinger MD., Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School and Director, Harvard Study of Adult Development, Massachusetts General Hospital, US

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1. Introduction

A wealth of research, built over decades and across disciplines, demonstrates the importance of social and emotional skills for human flourishing. These skills have their roots in early childhood and continue to develop throughout our lives.

At the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, we are working to build understanding of these skills and awareness of their importance. Such understanding is fundamental to inspire and enable action on this vital area of human development across society.

There is currently a lack of shared and accessible language about social and emotional skills. To address this, in 2023, we set out to develop a conceptual model of the social and emotional skills that matter most in being able to lead a happy, healthy life. We adopted an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the expertise of academic, clinical and practitioner audiences from multiple countries. We further consulted with the general public in the UK to ensure the framework format and wording were accessible to a broad audience.

This technical report describes the research and testing that was conducted to inform and underpin the Shaping Us Framework. Full details of the framework itself can be found in an accompanying document, the 'The Shaping Us Framework: Understanding the social and emotional skills that matter most'.



We hope that the Framework can help to raise awareness and build understanding of the critical importance of social and emotional skills, to inspire greater commitment, action and investment in their development during early childhood and beyond.

2. Methodology

The starting point for this process was our recognition that there is a lack of shared language to talk about social and emotional development. Considering this in the context of the UK, we viewed this as limiting our efforts to raise awareness of – and action on – this vital area of human development, in early childhood and beyond. To address these challenges, we designed a global listening exercise to develop a universal social and emotional skills framework based on:

- The views of academic, clinical and practitioner experts in human development, ascertained through a two round Delphi study (a consultation and prioritisation process), which were used to create a draft framework;
- Testing the language and structure of the draft framework with members of the general public. These insights, alongside further discussion with experts, informed refinement of the framework.

Figure overleaf illustrates the main phases of framework development which took place between July 2023 and March 2024.

Figure 1: Social and emotional skills framework development process

Each phase of the process is described below.



a. Delphi study

The Delphi methodology is a well-established and robust method of assessing the level of consensus among experts on a topic, typically through the use of repeated rounds of surveys (Iqbal & Pison-Young, 2009).¹ One of the challenges facing us was that the existing social and emotional development frameworks have a particular theoretical underpinning, such as developmental psychology or pedagogy, and are typically focussed on either child or adult development. Therefore, we purposefully designed a sample of participants from diverse disciplines and professional backgrounds, with expertise in the field of human development across the lifecourse. Using subsequent snowball sampling (asking participants to suggest others we might invite), we actively sought to extend the geographical and cultural diversity of experts invited to participate in the study.

Invitations comprising a participant information sheet and consent form were sent to 181 people who met the inclusion criteria for participation in the study. The consent form was completed by 124 people (69% of those invited) who were thus eligible to take part in the study.

The first-round survey was designed to be exploratory, to generate a list of skills that we could then test in the second-round survey. To this end, participants were asked a series of biographical and demographic questions and one main, open-text question: (see [Box 1](#) overleaf)

1. Iqbal, S., & Pison-Young, L. (2009, July 22). *The Delphi method*. The British Psychological Society. Retrieved June 7, 2024, from www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/delphi-method.

Box 1: Main question

In your view, what are the key social and emotional skills and capabilities that develop across the lifecourse, starting and continuing from early childhood, which enable us as individuals to lead happy, healthy lives?

Please use the spaces below to provide:

1) a short description or definition of up to 100 words for a maximum of ten skills or capabilities.

2) a term that you would use as a label of up to 5 words for each skill or capability you describe.

Seventy-two experts (see [Box 3](#) for a summary of the participant profile) submitted responses to the first-round survey (representing a response rate of 61%). Whilst the survey allowed people to submit a term and/or description for up to ten skills or capabilities, only 29 submitted ten. Overall, the average number of skills or capabilities per participant was 7.4 and a total 535 terms/descriptions of skills or capabilities were submitted. Most people provided a detailed description of the social and emotional skills or capabilities they thought most important, which generated a rich dataset. To thematically analyse the survey data, a member of The Royal Foundation research team and an independent researcher double-coded all the responses to the main question. Where differences in coding occurred, consensus was achieved in most cases through discussion between the researchers. The resulting codes were then reviewed by the Centre for Early Childhood Team and the Research and Impact Team at The Royal Foundation, and finally shared with the study advisory group (see [Acknowledgements](#) for details of the study advisory members) for feedback.

Overall, whilst people used quite different language both in their descriptions of skills or capabilities and the terms they selected, in effect many referred to similar skills or capabilities. However, as in all qualitative work, there were challenges in coding the responses. For example, participants referenced a mix of singular skills and collective skills, with some referring to ‘communication skills’ and others separating these into an ability to express oneself and to listen to others. To maintain consistency with the other skills and capabilities that were identified through the coding process, we chose to break down collective skills into their constituent components. More critically,

there was extensive discussion with the study advisory group about whether some skills and capabilities were in fact personality traits, outcomes, behaviours or emotions (see [Box 2](#) for further details).

Box 2 – Concept definitions

In the field of social and emotional development, defining concepts is critical. Theorists, academics and practitioners typically talk about traits, skills, competencies and mindsets. Each of these categories is set out below.

Traits: A trait can be seen as a stable characteristic or predisposition that influences how people behave. A good example is emotional stability: individuals who score highly here tend to experience fewer fluctuations in mood and are better able to cope with stress.

Skills: Social and emotional skills are specific learned behaviours or actions that enable individuals to perform tasks effectively, for example being able to recognise, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions.

Competencies: Competencies go beyond skills and involve a deeper level of proficiency and effectiveness. Competencies imply a combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that support individuals in handling complex situations such as applying emotion regulation to real life situations such as conflict management.

Mindsets: Mindset refers to the underlying attitudes, beliefs, or frameworks individuals hold about themselves and can influence how we act. These beliefs can shape how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to their own and others' emotions. As an example, someone with a growth mindset regarding emotions might believe that emotional intelligence can be developed and improved over time, while someone with a fixed mindset might believe that emotion skills are unchangeable.

In the field of social and emotional development, it is critical to understand, for example, if emotion regulation is a trait or a skill, as it indicates how malleable or learnable a concept it. Traits, for example, are viewed as less learnable than skills. The learnability of skills is crucially important when we consider how to support the development of social and emotional skills, as in parent/carer interactions or more formal schools-based programmes.

Despite the Shaping Us Framework containing some traits and concepts, we have chosen to use the term 'skills' throughout due to its linguistic simplicity in a framework that is primarily designed to raise general awareness and knowledge of a topic. This decision was supported through both rounds of testing with the general public, who confirmed a preference for the term.

Following review of the coded survey responses internally and by the study advisory group, a final list of 33 skills, along with a consensus description based on the first-round survey responses, was produced to be tested in the second-round survey. Table 1 (below) lists the skills in alphabetical order along with the consensus descriptions.

Table 1: Skills identified through the first-round survey

| Skill name | Consensus description |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Acceptance of others | Understand and accept others and their diverse identities, beliefs and behaviours |
| Aspiration | Desire and drive to grow and progress in life with purpose |
| Attachment formation | Form a deep, enduring emotional connection with another |
| Boundary management | Understand and set boundaries to protect wellbeing |
| Capacity for joy | Experience joy in life and the world |
| Capacity for love | Feel deep affection for self and others |
| Communication processing | Receive and process information from others |
| Conflict management | Discuss and resolve differences |
| Creativity | Think of or explore new ideas |
| Critical thinking | Conceptualise and evaluate information |
| Curiosity | Approach life inquisitively with an open mind to new ideas and experiences |
| Decision making | Select a course of action based on information received and processed |
| Emotion knowledge | Identify or recognise, label, make sense of emotions in oneself and in others |
| Emotion regulation | Manage emotional responses |
| Empathy | Put oneself in another's position and feel or relate to what another might be feeling |
| Express oneself | Convey one's thoughts, feelings, and needs in a way that is appropriate to the audience and context |
| Flexibility | Willing to change or compromise in response to changing situations |

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Focus | Sustain attention despite distractions |
| Generosity | Give freely to others |
| Impulse control | Control over actions, especially in challenging situation |
| Kindness | Be caring and considerate towards self and others |
| Mentalisation | Understand own and others' mental states |
| Perseverance | Make continued effort despite difficulty |
| Perspective taking | Understand the point of view of another |
| Problem solving | Find a solution to a difficult situation |
| Relationship formation | Form and maintain harmonious relationships |
| Resilience | Recover from difficulties or challenges |
| Self-awareness | Know yourself |
| Self esteem | Feel assured/positive about oneself as a person and in one's abilities |
| Sense of agency | Feel in control of life and able to affect change |
| Social interaction | Get along with others |
| Thought management | Able to organise and coordinate thoughts, often in pursuit of a goal/s |

Invitations to the second-round survey were sent to all registered study participants, regardless of whether they had completed the first-round survey. Invitations were also emailed to additional potential participants who were proposed by the first-round respondents.

Eighty-four experts (see [Box 3](#) for a summary of the participant profile) completed the second-round survey, which was designed to ascertain how important each of the skills tested are in shaping humans and our lives on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 9 (very important). We chose this design, rather than asking people to rank the skills in order of importance relative to one another, as we wanted to determine the perceived importance of each individual skill, as opposed to aiming to derive a shortlist of skills, e.g. the ten ranked most important by participants. This approach fits the purpose of the final output: to raise general awareness about the skills in the conceptual model and inspire greater involvement and commitment to investing in the development

of these skills in early childhood and across the lifecourse (see section 3c of the main report, [‘The Shaping Us Framework: Understanding the social and emotional skills that matter most’](#) for more detail).

Box 3 – Participant profile

Delphi study

In both rounds of the Delphi study, we asked participants to describe the type of organisation they work for (if any), their primary discipline, gender identity, and primary country of residence. This provided some indication of who was taking part in the surveys and helped to monitor if we were reaching the desired balance of people from different types of professions and countries.

Seventy-two people responded to the first-round survey, and 70 answered questions about themselves. The overall profile of round one comprised:

- 39 people (56%) reported working in an academic or research organisation and 31 (44%) worked in healthcare services, the voluntary sector, and so on. However, this masked the reality that some people have more than one role, e.g. working as a clinician and in a university.
- 44 respondents (63%) described their primary discipline as developmental psychology or the early years, while 26 (37%) worked in a different field. Most in the latter worked in social care or for services for people experiencing multiple disadvantage, as such as homelessness or involvement in the criminal justice system.
- 49 people (70%) reported their main country of residence being in the UK, 23 (19%) lived in the US, and 8 (11%) in another country.
- 57 people (81%) identified their gender as female. Twelve people (17%) were male, and 1 person (1%) stated their gender as ‘questioning’.

In the second round, 84 experts completed the survey and 76 provided answers to all questions about their personal circumstances. As a result of the targeted snowballing approach, we reached a slightly more geographically diverse audience in this round, with 49 people (61%) currently living in the UK, 16 (20%) in the US, and 15 (19%) living outside these countries. We also recruited a larger number of men (n=22; 28%) and people with a broader range of professional expertise (n=23; 28%) than in round one. The percentage split between academic/research organisations and service providers was the same as the first round.

Language testing with the public

In the first round, 36 participants from the general public – including specific subgroups of interest such as parents and young people – were recruited by Savanta, an independent research agency commissioned to conduct the testing. The second round of testing comprised twenty members of the general public and nine members of staff at The Royal Foundation of The Prince and Princess of Wales.

Data from the second-round survey were analysed by calculating i) the average (mean) of all scores for each skill, and ii) the coefficient of variation (the standard deviation), for each skill which was used to determine the level of consensus between participants. Overall, that data indicate that:

1. on average, participants viewed all the skills as being important to some degree, i.e. the average for each skill was 6 or higher which is above the mid-point score of 5 (see Figure 2). Two thirds of the skills were scored 7 or higher on average.
2. there was a good level of agreement between participants, demonstrated by a relatively low coefficient of variation score (<0.3) for each skill (see Figure 3).

We also tested for differences in scoring between two sets of biographical categories. By and large, very few statistically significant differences ($p < .001$) were found. Statistically significant differences in scores were found only for emotion regulation ($p < .001$), between participants who were identified as being experts in childhood development versus those with different subject matter expertise. Between participants based in academic institutions and those in practice or policy roles, a statistically significant difference was found for perspective taking ($p = .001$). This is an encouraging result as it suggests a level of agreement across disciplines and professional groups.

Figure 2: Average importance of social and emotional skills tested



Figure 3: Coefficient of variation of social and emotional skills tested



Participants also had the opportunity to provide an explanation for (and links to) evidence that supported their scoring decision. These data were invaluable, alongside guidance from the study advisory group, in refining the list of skills to include in the conceptual model. In total, we excluded one skill (self esteem) and combined two other skills (perspective taking and mentalisation) to generate a final list of thirty skills to retain in the conceptual model.

The next phase of the model development comprised reviewing the skills terminology and organising the skills by domain or cluster. Such steps were taken to create a conceptual model that maintains scholarly accuracy, but which also - importantly - is accessible to a lay audience, such as practitioners and the general public. Equally, the study advisory group, also advised that there is no definitive theoretical approach to grouping social and emotional skills by domain, not least because the skills are highly interdependent (see [Box 4](#) for more detail).

Box 4 – Interdependence of social and emotional skills

It is widely recognised that social and emotional skills are highly interdependent. Many of the skills in this framework rely on other skills – sometimes from different clusters – and some serve as foundational prerequisites for others. Some examples of the close relationship between the skills in the Shaping Us Framework include:

- Understanding your own and others' emotions relies on self-awareness
- Regulating emotions involves understanding and labelling emotions accurately, and is also key to many other skills such as focussing your attention and managing conflict
- Decision making is related to other social and emotional skills, including managing your feelings and thoughts, problem solving, and communication
- Being able to solve problems involves creativity, through being able to imagine different outcomes to a problem and generating a solution
- Understanding what someone is trying to convey to you in spoken, written or signed language includes interpreting the message they are sharing and its meaning. This can require creativity to understand the meaning from the speaker's point of view rather than your own
- Kindness is thought of by some as drawing on the ability to feel what someone else might be feeling, understand how someone else might be thinking, and getting on with others

- Building positive relationships involves many skills such as empathy as well as a certain level of curiosity i.e. being interested in and curious about the other person.
- Collaboration can draw on a range of skills including getting on with others, listening to and understanding others, expressing yourself, solving problems, and managing conflict.

The initial draft of the model comprised the thirty skills organised into six domains. The names and descriptions of skills and domains – as well as the overall name and structure of the conceptual model – were then subject to extensive review by the study advisory group and additional subject matters experts, and to cognitive testing with the general public before being finalised. (see section 3b of the main report, [‘The Shaping Us Framework: Understanding the social and emotional skills that matter most’](#) for more detail).

b. Public concept and language testing

The second phase of the global listening exercise involved testing draft versions of the social and emotional skills framework to ensure the structure and language were accessible to a general audience. This phase of the research was undertaken by Savanta, an independent data, market and research company based in the UK.

Public testing was conducted over two rounds in October 2023 and February 2024, with a pause for reflection between to allow for the refinement of the framework. Initial testing of the existing materials was carried out to understand what language, words, and overall narratives resonated most effectively with the general public and key groups of stakeholders. Subsequent language testing was conducted to contextualise and shortlist key framework elements, before conducting a final quantitative evaluation of the most accessible elements.

The two rounds of research were specifically designed to address the following objectives:

- **Identification** of the most resonant terminology for describing the social and emotional skills in the conceptual model.
- **Understanding** of social and emotional skills via the gathering of thoughts on spontaneous associations, testing of definitions, and consideration of alternative names.

- **Assessment** of the proposed clustering of skills by The Royal Foundation by exploring public perceptions of how skills should be grouped and categorised.
- **Evaluation** of how the framework definition was received by lay audiences.
- **Ideation** of the most effective terminology for referring to the framework, including the creation of a compelling name and strapline.

These objectives were achieved using a mixed methods approach comprising an online community platform (Round 1 and 2), an ideation session (Round 2) and quantitative testing (Round 2), which allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the views of a range of audiences. Details of each method are set out below.

An online community platform was utilised across both rounds of testing. This platform facilitated a range of agile and flexible activities over four days, leading to rich feedback and detailed outputs. Participants (see [Box 3](#) for a summary of the participant profile) logged in each day for up to 20 minutes, providing feedback on selected materials. This format also allowed for real-time observation of discussions and enabled the moderator team to probe participants. Participation was flexible and inclusive, leading to more considered responses and enabling those who are geographically dispersed or have disabilities or childcare needs to participate.

Prior to the second round of testing, an ideation session was held involving staff from and an advisor to The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood and language experts at Savanta. The current list of skills and proposed framework names were reviewed, alternative framings were explored, and the most suitable ones were shortlisted for the next stages of the project.

Finally, specific elements of the final version of the draft framework were quantitatively tested in the second round through a survey of a large, nationally representative sample of 2,219 UK adults aged 18 years and over, representative by age, gender, region and socio-economic status. This provided a robust assessment of the materials and credible subgroup base sizes across key demographic breaks. The questions were run on the weekly General Population Savanta omnibus survey for efficiency.

The key learnings from the language testing were:

- The overall concept of social and emotional skills was generally understood by participants, but there was often a lack of detailed understanding and language to articulate the skills being tested.
- Certain skills, such as self-awareness, kindness, and resilience, were more familiar to participants and the definitions provided were well-received. However, other skills were found to need more refined names or definitions to enhance understanding. This was approached in the Round 2 of testing.
- The approach of clustering skills was largely well-received, with many participants finding the clusters intuitive. However, some participants felt that the names of the clusters were too 'academic', and these were redrafted and tested again in Round 2.
- Participants in Round 1 suggested names for the social and emotional skills framework. In Round 2 and the omnibus survey, a shortlist of names was tested for 'best fit' with the framework.
- The definition of social and emotional skills tested performed well with the general public in terms of ease of comprehension, being informative and convincing.

In summary, the insights from Round 1 of testing played a crucial role in informing the initial design of the social and emotional skills framework, which was then tested for comprehension with the general public in Round 2. The headline findings following Round 1 were shared publicly at The Centre for Early Childhood's Shaping Us National Symposium in November 2023. This allowed expert audiences to discuss the practical application of the framework.

Shaping US

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