



STARTING WITH PLAY

Play Well's Approach to Educational Audio Content Creation

I. Introduction

COVID-19, economic hardships, and school closures are overwhelming families around the world. At the peak of the crisis, an estimated 1.9 billion students—95% of all school children across over 190 countries—experienced disrupted learning due to school closures.¹ As of October 2020, over a billion students continue to experience school closures or only partial educational services. War-affected communities, with weak or non-existent social services, market infrastructure, and safety nets, are among those most affected. Children in these communities who are unable to access the predictable, supportive routines of school not only miss opportunities to learn and build social-emotional skills, but are less likely to re-enroll when schools reopen and more likely to remain out of school forever. These children are at greatest risk for far-reaching consequences of learning disruptions, including reduced academic achievement and long-term impacts to mental health and economic prosperity. Research shows that learning through play is not only vital for children's healthy cognitive and social-emotional development, but also can help build resilience in coping with stress and adversity.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) received emergency funding to address the critical needs of children and families facing prolonged isolation from peers, community, and school, on top of the existing challenges of displacement. Under this project, titled Play Well, IRC will create play-based social-emotional learning (SEL) content for children that will be delivered via radio and other audio devices in four contexts and languages: Spanish, English, French, and Arabic.

The SEL-focused audio program aims to create: (1) remote learning opportunities for children that have very limited internet and technology access and (2) easy-to-use content for caregivers at home with potentially low education and literacy rates to support their own social-emotional well-being as well as their child's.

The IRC will begin Play Well by developing audio programming for children ages 6-12 affected by the crisis in Venezuela and living in vulnerable communities in Colombia.

This report documents the approach that the IRC has taken to identify SEL areas that are of greatest priority for these children in the midst of the pandemic and ongoing refugee crisis. This approach ensures that the voices of experts and users in this context are at the center of Play Well's Spanish content design from the beginning, while also consulting global leaders in the field to align the content with the latest innovations and best practices in SEL and audio learning. The SEL framework for Play Well content that resulted from this process will be used as a jumping off point for later workshops with contextual and global experts from the other languages and countries of implementation.

The play-forward approach to Play Well's content creation includes three-parts:

1. Develop and distribute surveys to identify the highest priority SEL skills for children affected by the Venezuelan crisis.
2. Conduct workshops with contextual and global experts to analyze survey results, develop listener personas based on the lived experience of children and families affected by the crisis in Venezuela, and generate initial ideas for engaging, culturally-relevant play-based SEL content.
3. Co-create the SEL framework and guidance package for the production partner to inform storyline and script development.



PHOTO: ANDRES BRENNER/IRC

II. Survey Results

Logistics

As a first step to developing the Play Well Spanish content, an Audio Content Survey was designed to gather information from experts that would inform decisions on the target SEL domains and skill areas.

The survey questions focused on the learning and development needs of refugee children living in Colombia. The survey results were presented in two technical workshops in Spanish and English, ultimately leading to the development of an SEL framework for the audio content.

The survey was developed and disseminated via Microsoft Forms in Spanish and English, with responses gathered between September 11-27th, 2020. The language of the survey was determined by the respondent's browser language setting. If the browser setting was not English or Spanish, the respondent received the English version.

The survey was written by members of IRC's HQ-based education team, with input and translation by IRC's education team in Colombia. Together, these contributors make up the Play Well team.

Respondents

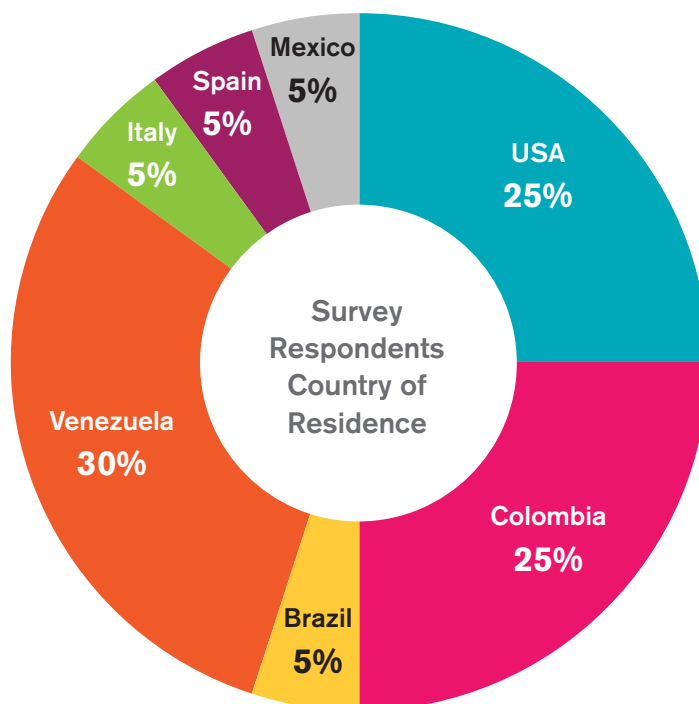
The Play Well team targeted respondents in Latin America by reaching out to a group of experts in EiE, SEL, child development, and/or education in Colombia and Venezuela. Respondents with contextual and/or global expertise were also recruited from the INEE PSS-SEL Collaborative, Colombia's National Education Cluster, and pre-existing contacts from the IRC and LEGO Foundation.

Of the 45 respondents, 65% of respondents reside in Latin American countries. We did not disaggregate for country of origin or language, as the data were not conclusive. However, we know that some respondents were not nationals of their country of residence, and that the browser setting is not indicative of native language.

In addition, respondents were asked to self identify their professional roles. The top three types of roles identified were practitioners at 35% (n=16) of respondents, researchers at 17% (n=8), and government workers at 15% (n=7). Other roles identified include donor/funders, caregivers, and students.



PHOTO: JUAN ARREDONDO/IRC



Prioritization

When asked to prioritize 6 SEL domains (Emotion, Identity, Cognitive, Values, Social, Perspectives) from most to least critical for children in Colombia and Venezuela, given the realities of the refugee crisis and COVID-19, Emotion was ranked as the most important domain, followed by Identity.

- **Emotion:** The Emotion domain includes skills that help one recognize, express, and control their emotions as well as understand and empathize with others.
- **Identity:** The Identity domain includes how one understands and perceive themselves and their abilities. It includes one's knowledge and beliefs about themselves, including one's ability to learn and grow. When one feel good about one's; sure of their place in the world; and confident in their ability to learn, grow, and overcome obstacles, it becomes easier to cope with challenges and build positive relationships.
- **Cognitive:** The Cognitive domain includes the basic cognitive skills required to direct behavior toward the attainment of a goal. These include skills like focusing attention, working memory, impulse control, etc.
- **Values:** The Values domain includes the skills, character traits/virtues, and habits that support one to be a positive and productive member of a particular community. It encompasses understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values; the desire to perform to one's highest potential; and the habits required to live and work together with others as a friend, family member, and citizen.
- **Social:** The Social domain includes skills that help one accurately interpret other people's behavior, effectively navigate social situations, and interact positively with others.

- **Perspectives:** The Perspectives domain includes how one views and approaches the world. It impacts how one sees themselves, others, and their own circumstances and influences how they interpret and approach challenges in their daily life. A positive perspective can help one protect against and manage negative feelings to successfully accomplish tasks and get along with others.

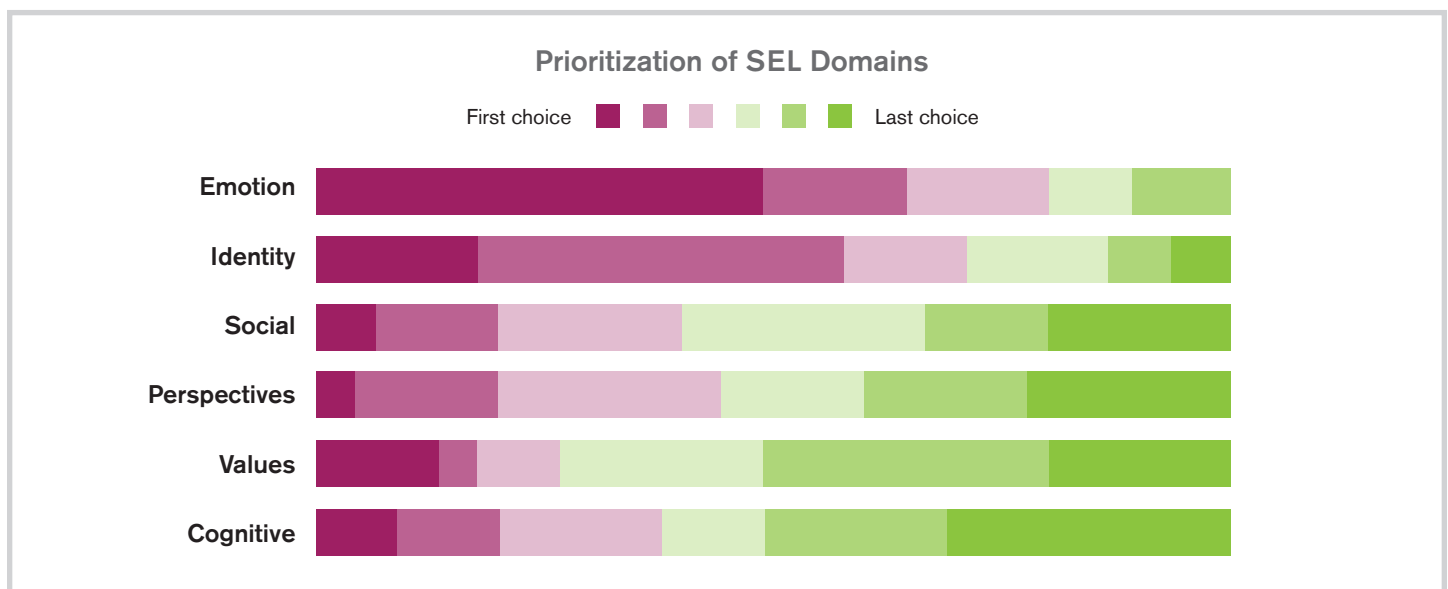
Summarized from The Taxonomy Project by Harvard EASEL Lab²

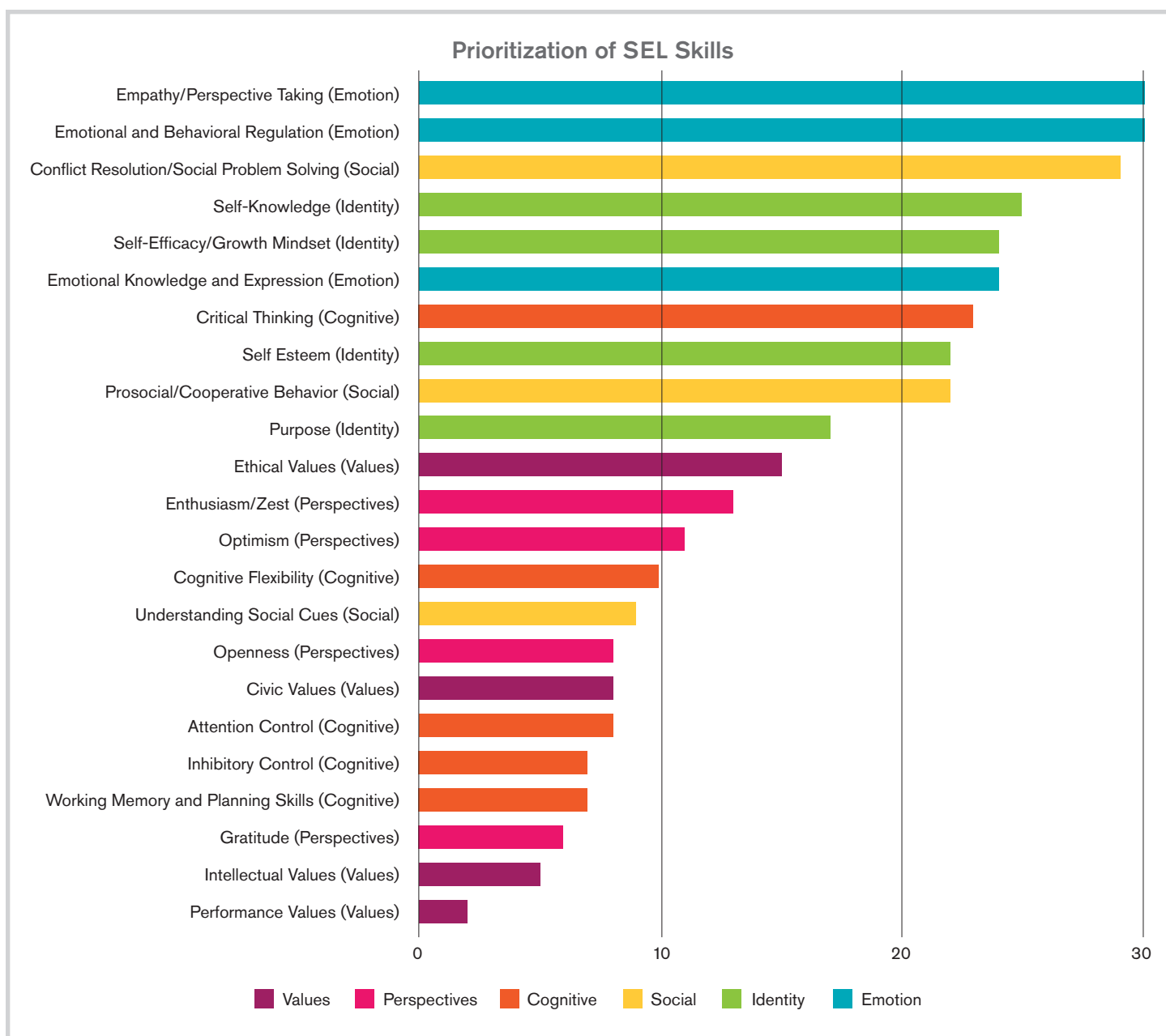
When asked to select the 8 most important SEL skills (from a group of 26 skills spanning the 8 domains), responses were mostly in alignment with the domain rankings. Of the top 8 skill areas, the IRC team has decided to prioritize the skill areas of the two highest ranking domains: Emotion and Identity.

Looking at how respondents from the different (self-identified) roles, practitioners more frequently prioritized identity-related skills areas, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-knowledge and purpose, compared to the other groups. Practitioners and researchers were slightly more interested in the Cognitive skills than the other groups, based on their selected SEL skills.

Taking into account all survey responses, the top eight skill areas were the following:

1. Emotional and behavioral regulation (Emotion)–30 respondents
2. Empathy/Perspective Taking (Emotion)–30 respondents
3. Conflict resolution/social problem solving (Social)–29 respondents
4. Knowledge and emotional expression (Emotion)–25 respondents
5. Critical thinking (Cognitive)–24 respondents
6. Self-knowledge (Identity)–24 respondents
7. Self-efficacy/growth mindset (Identity)–23 respondents
8. Prosocial/Cooperative Behavior (Social)–22 respondents





When asked why respondents selected these SEL skill areas as most important, the following points were raised consistently:

- 1. Psychological and social emotional processes must be strengthened first, in order to advance cognitive processes.** The relationship with oneself and with others is critical to social integration and development of effective ties and support networks.
- 2. Children in social exclusion settings often have emotional challenges and diminished self-esteem that affects the way they learn, so interventions should focus on those aspects first to maximize learning potential.** Refugee and

migration experiences without support can be traumatizing for children and lead to high levels of stress. Without resources and skills to cope with these experiences, children's development and long-term outcomes may suffer. Emotion, identity and social skills protect against these negative effects and contribute to mental health.

- 3. During the COVID crisis, it is more important than ever to develop skills in understanding one's emotions and communicating them to an adult or peer.** When experiencing significant changes in context, children need programs that will encourage hope and strengthen their identity, despite the challenges that are presented to them.

III. Advisory Workshops

Advisory Overview

The IRC Play Well team assembled two groups of experts to participate in advisory activities for Play Well's content: one Contextual Advisory group, focused on ensuring that the content is appropriate for children in Colombia and Venezuela, and a second Global Advisory Group, focused on ensuring that the content reflects the best and most innovative practices in SEL instruction and child development. These groups will continue to support the project by providing technical knowledge and input through ongoing feedback on the Spanish content and/or participation in development for other languages.

The Play Well advisory groups for Spanish language content were assembled with the following objectives:

OBJECTIVE 1

To influence the scope of a children's audio program that will contribute to children's development through play

OBJECTIVE 2

To develop listener personas based on the lived experiences of children and caregivers affected by the Venezuelan crisis

OBJECTIVE 3:

To provide a forum for global and regional experts to test and review audio content

Similar advisory groups will be assembled for the remaining language and countries in the Play Well initiative. For each location there will be two advisory groups: one Contextual Advisory Group that meets in the local language and one Global Advisory Group that meets in English. Both groups are comprised of the following individuals:

- Experts in education, holistic child development, especially social and emotional development as well as speech and language
- Experts in learning through play, especially implementing and researching programs at the local levels
- Practitioners and experts in education in emergencies who are knowledgeable about the countries in which the initiative will operate
- Educational audio experts
- LEGO Foundation representatives



PHOTO: JUAN ARREDONDO/IRC

Contextual Advisory Workshop (Spanish)

On September 30th, 18 Spanish Advisory Group members convened in a virtual Contextual Advisory Workshop. The group reviewed prioritized SEL outcomes from the survey and confirmed that they were relevant for the target populations in Colombia and Venezuela.

Participants were then asked to collaboratively create listener personas that represent the target population groups in Colombia and Venezuela. These personas included a 6 year old girl from a rural community, a 9 year old boy living on the frontier of Colombia, and 30 year old male caregiver, and a 12 year old girl who lives in an urban community in Colombia.

Finally, participants provided ideas and insights for episode storylines and characters, based on prioritized SEL outcomes and key contextual considerations.

At the end of the workshop, Spanish Advisory Group members confirmed that they would be willing to contribute their expertise during the development and testing phase of language content.



Yesenia, 6 years old



Venezuela in a rural community

Lives with her grandparents (illiterate) and her 3 younger siblings, her parents work in the capital.



- No electricity
- No running water
- No internet



Grandfather has a basic phone, to communicate with her parents. There's also a radio which the family uses to listen to the news.



Carlos Javier, 9 years old



Colombian in a rural community near the frontier

Lives with his parents, grandparents and siblings.



- Electricity
- Clean running water
- No internet



They have a TV without cable, radio and a cellphone.



Juan Carlos, 35 years old



Venezuela in a rural community by the frontier

Lives with his wife and his 4 children, the oldest is 15 and the smallest 4.



- No electricity
- No running water
- Access to internet



He has a smartphone, owns a TV with directv, and a radio. His phone has a rechargeable data plan.



Wilmary, 12 years old



Colombia in an urban community

Lives with friends of her parents, she shares her room with many others who she doesn't know.



- Electricity
- Running water
- Access to internet



She has access to a smartphone but it is not hers. She uses it to connect with her family through WhatsApp.

Global Advisory Workshop

The Global Advisory Workshop was held on October 5th and 25 members attended to learn about the listener personas developed by the Spanish audio content workshop participants and explore how specific SEL skills could be developed through playful audio.

After a review of survey results and user personas, the Global Advisory Group members participated in a small group activity to create samples of an SEL audio episode. Each group was tasked with showcasing at least one example of play activity that reinforces a SEL skill area and is engaging in an audio format, keeping in

mind the listener personas. Participants used their voices, sounds from a customized soundbank, and ingenuity to create up to 3 minutes of an audio episode sample, which was shared in the larger group. The samples incorporated various IAI elements including, interactive play, storytelling, characters, narration, music positive reinforcement cues, and SEL messaging.

At the end of the workshop, Global Advisory Group members confirmed that they would be willing to continue contributing to Play Well during the development and testing phase of content.

Play Well Soundboards!

Effects

1 door knock	2 ta-da!	3 school bell	4 transformation
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop
Stop	Stop	Stop	Stop
5 sneaking xylophone	6 xylophone suspense	Q Sci-fi beam	W Water in a pipe
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop
Stop	Stop	Stop	Stop
E Spooky sci-fi	R Car door shut	T Car passing by	Y Crushing sound
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop
Stop	Stop	Stop	Stop

Intro

1 happy game	2 triumphant carpet ride	3 ghost hunting	4 "You're listening to ____"
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop
Stop	Stop	Stop	Stop
5 Jungle animals			
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop			
Stop			

Human

1 child cough	2 child scream	3 children playing	4 baby laughter
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop
Stop	Stop	Stop	Stop
5 pouring soda water	6 crunchy snow	Q loud applause!	W writing on paper
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop
Stop	Stop	Stop	Stop
E evil laughter	R adult cough	T lukewarm applause	Y brushing teeth
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop
Stop	Stop	Stop	Stop

Music

1 vibraphone cha cha!	2 if you're happy and	3 adventure time	4 goofy bossa nova
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop
Stop	Stop	Stop	Stop
5 focus adventure	6 mystery magic		
<input type="checkbox"/> Loop	<input type="checkbox"/> Loop		
Stop	Stop		

IV. SEL Framework

The survey results and workshops resulted in following SEL framework for the Play Well audio content in Spanish. The IRC will work with the selected production company to apply the framework and embed specific learning objectives for each skill area into the episodes.

While the Emotion and Identify domains are the primary objectives, given the context and demographics, Social (e.g. Prosocial/ Cooperative Behavior) and Perspective (e.g. Enthusiasm/Zest) domains will also be reinforced as topics that will be modeled by characters or appear in the audio storylines. The Cognitive domain will not be an explicit target of the programming, however culturally relevant numeracy and literacy activities will be included throughout the episodes.



PHOTO: ANDRES BRENNER/IRC

Primary Objectives

These will be the central SEL domains explicitly taught in the audio program, practiced through activities and reinforced by key messages.



▪ **Emotion Knowledge and Expression:** Identify the concept of emotions, name and identify types of emotions, learning how emotions are experienced and expressed.

▪ **Emotion and Behavior Regulation:** Recognize when they are experiencing difficult or strong emotions, and identify and practice strategies to calm down strong emotions, and express their reactions in a healthy way.

▪ **Empathy/Perspective-Taking:** Recognize, accept, respond to feelings and perspectives of others, and appreciate differences and similarities among people. Identify the impact of one's actions, or an external cause, on others.

▪ **Self-Knowledge:** The ability to understand oneself; the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values, and how they influence behavior. Moreover, it's an understanding of the different components by which one defines their identity (gender, nationality, culture, religion, etc.)

▪ **Self-Efficacy and Growth Mindset:** An individual's belief in their ability to achieve a goal. By believing one is capable of something, and can help themselves on the path to achieving it (growth mind-set).

▪ **Self-Esteem:** Ability to see oneself as worthy, valuable, and capable. Develop a positive self-identity, and have confidence in one's abilities.

VI. Next Steps

Engagement with leading voices in SEL, child development, and Venezuelan refugee support from Latin America and around the world has been critical to laying a strong foundation for Play Well's Spanish audio content. The IRC will select a production partner (or partners) who will develop audio content for the target audience that focuses on the prioritized SEL skills areas. The production partner will be provided with a technical guidance package that provides detail on the survey findings and workshop content. This approach allows for us to partner with production and creative specialists to develop content that is rooted in local preferences and realities of Colombian and Venezuelan refugees.

The process of surveying local populations and engaging with Advisory Groups, both context-specific and global, will be also carried into Play Well's other languages and locations. In this way, the IRC will ensure that the content produced for children is designed for their unique needs and preferences.



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ENDNOTES

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¹ UNESCO, Global Education Coalition. September, 2020. *Responding To COVID-19 And Beyond, The Global Education Coalition In Action*. [online] Available at: <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374364>> [Accessed 13 November 2020].

² ExploreSEL.GSE.harvard.edu. 2020. Explore SEL. [online] Available at: <<http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/>> [Accessed 13 November 2020].