UC SANTA BARBARA
School Mental Health COLLABORATIVE

Development and History
Social Emotional Distress Survey-Secondary (10-item form)
Social Emotional Distress Survey-Brief (5-item form)

We developed the SEDS-S while collaborating with school districts that were implementing universal mental health and wellness screenings. In response to schools' interest, we aimed to create a brief measure of students' internalizing experiences related to emotional distress to enhance a universal screening tool. Our primary focus was not to make a diagnostic instrument but to identify items that capture students' everyday distressing emotional experiences that can negatively affect their quality of life.

In its initial version, the SEDS-S included 10 items, each addressing emotions and experiences related to sadness and anxiety. The studies listed below demonstrate that this 10-item version shows evidence of being a unidimensional skill, with acceptable validity and reliability. This scale is a valuable tool in school settings and is especially beneficial for research on children's mental health.

We developed a 10-item version of the SEDS-S, but recognize the need for a shorter, more adaptable scale for population-based assessments or surveillance of school-based mental health. While the 10-item scale is effective for universal mental health screenings and surveys, a briefer version offers several advantages. A validated shorter scale would provide greater flexibility in the types of questions included in universal screening surveys while reducing the survey burden on students.

To meet this need, we created a 5-item version of the SEDS-S, called SEDS-Brief. This revised version maintains a validated unidimensional framework and demonstrates acceptable levels of validity, stability, and reliability, as evidenced by the studies referenced below.

These two versions of the SEDS provide school-based mental health professionals and researchers with reliable, validated measurement tools. The decision on which version to use should be based on the specific objectives and needs of the researchers and practitioners, as well as the requirements of their individual projects.

Social Emotional Distress Survey (10-item)

2018

Dowdy, E., Furlong, M. J., Nylund-Gibson, K., Moore, S., & Moffa, K. (2018). Initial Validation of the Social Emotional Distress Survey–Secondary to Support Complete Mental Health Screening. *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, *43*(4), 241-248. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534508417749871

Contemporary mental health assessments focus on both well-being and distress. This study provides initial validation data for the Social Emotional Distress Survey–Secondary (SEDS-S), a school-based tool that uses brief self-report measures.

Analyzing data from 3,780 U.S. high school students, the findings indicate a one-factor model for distress with good fit. Path analyses showed significant positive correlations between the SEDS-S distress factor and symptoms of anxiety and depression, alongside a significant negative correlation with life satisfaction and strengths scores.

The discussion addresses future research directions and the tool's application in school-based screenings.

2024

Rodríguez-Jiménez, T., Vidal-Arenas, V., Falcó, R. *et al*. Assessing Emotional Distress in Adolescents: Psychometrics of the Spanish Version of the Social Emotional Distress Scale-Secondary. *Child Youth Care Forum* 53, 367–387 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-023-09758-5

The Social Emotional Distress Scale-Secondary (SEDS-S) is a brief measure for school-based mental health screening that focuses on self-reported well-being and distress. While the English version has shown validity and reliability, there is limited research on its psychometric properties for Spanish-speaking youths.

Examine the properties of the SEDS-S in Spanish adolescents, focusing on its reliability, structure, validity (convergent and discriminant), measurement invariance across gender and over time, and normative data.

The study involved 5,550 adolescents aged 12–18 years. Test–retest reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega, while convergent and discriminant validity were measured with Pearson's correlation. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) assessed structural validity, and a multigroup longitudinal analysis examined the stability of latent structures across time and gender.

The CFA indicated a unidimensional latent structure that was invariant across gender and time. The scale showed good reliability (coefficient> .85), and the SEDS-S score was positively related to distress and negatively to well-being, confirming convergent/discriminant validity.

This study provides initial evidence that the Spanish version of the SEDS-S reliably and validly assesses emotional distress in adolescents, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. The findings also indicate that SEDS-S is a suitable tool for screening and program evaluation in various contexts beyond schools.

2025

De Caro, E.F., Brugnera, A., Donisi, V. *et al.* Evaluating Psychological Distress in Adolescence: The Italian Validation of the Social Emotional Distress Scale-Secondary Level. *School Mental Health* (2025). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-025-09833-3

Social-emotional distress during school years is linked to adverse mental health outcomes, highlighting the need for an effective screening tool. This study aimed to validate the Social Emotional Distress Scale - Secondary Level (SEDS-S) among Italian adolescents.

The sample included 1,210 high school students (57.7% female) aged 15 to 18 years, of whom 858 responded after 5 months. Results confirmed the SEDS-S's one-factor structure, demonstrating good reliability and stability over time, as well as consistency across genders.

Girls reported higher social-emotional distress than boys. The scale showed strong correlations with emotional problems, supporting its convergent validity, while modest correlations with externalizing symptoms and a negative link to well-being confirmed its discriminant validity.

Overall, the findings validate the Italian version of the SEDS-S as a suitable tool for screening social-emotional issues in schools.

School Emotional Distress Survey-Brief (5-item)

2023

Dowdy, E., Furlong, M. J., Nylund-Gibson, K., Arch, D., Hinton, T., & Carter, D. (2022). Validating a Brief Student Distress Measure for Schoolwide Wellness Surveillance. *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, *48*(3), 159-169. https://doi.org/10.1177/15345084221138947

The Social Emotional Distress Survey–Secondary (SEDS-S) assesses adolescents' psychological distress over the past month. This study evaluated a five-item version, the SEDS-S-Brief, for monitoring student well-being in schools.

Three samples were involved: Sample 1 included 105,771 students from 113 California secondary schools, which provided evidence of the survey's internal structure. Sample 2 included 10,770 students who also completed various assessments, allowing for validation against other variables. Sample 3 comprised 773 students who completed the SEDS-S-Brief annually for 3 years, enabling analysis of response stability.

The SEDS-S-Brief showed consistency across different student demographics, including sex, grade level, and Latinx status. Additional analyses indicated strong convergent and discriminant validity, as well as one- and two-year stability. These findings support the development of effective mental health monitoring practices to enhance school-based services for youth.

2025

Furlong, M.J., O'Malley, M., Chan, Mk. *et al.* The California Student Wellness Index: Development, Validation, and Multi-Tier Applications. *Contemporary School Psychology,* 29, 315–332 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-024-00519-2

The California School Wellness Index (CSWI) is a tool for mental health research and practice in schools, designed for wellness screening and monitoring. It is a 0–40 composite index based on responses to the Brief Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS) and the Social Emotional Distress Scale (SEDS), grounded in the Dual-Factor Mental Health model. Developed using data from 626,940 California secondary students during the 2021/22 and 2022/23 academic years, the CSWI has undergone psychometric and normative analyses. It has shown concurrent validity with the Social Emotional Health Survey-Secondary and predictive validity with the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form. The tool can be used within a Multi-

Tiered Support System (MTSS) for various applications, including identifying students needing support and evaluating student services. The Online Supplemental Material offers additional resources for using the CSWI effectively.

Chan, M-k., Dowdy, E., Park, H. K., Furlong, M. J., & Nylund-Gibson, K. (2025). Validating the Social Emotional Distress Survey Secondary–Brief Among Adolescents with Intersecting Sexual and Gender Identities. Assessment.

The Social Emotional Distress Survey-Secondary Brief (SEDS-Brief) is a five-item self-report scale widely used in school-based mental health screening to assess adolescents' internalizing distress. Little empirical evidence exists regarding its application among SGD students. Using a sample of 460,542 U.S. adolescents (3.6% Native American, 21.2% Asian, 7.9% Black, 38.4% Hispanic, 2.7% Pacific Islander, 7.8% Others, 18.4% White, 47.2% Female, 52.3% Male), this study evaluated the psychometric properties of the SEDS-Brief across 17 SGD groups with intersecting sexual and gender identities. Results supported a unidimensional factor structure, strong internal consistency, and high validity across all groups. Measurement invariance testing indicated support for configural, partial metric, and partial scalar invariance. Item response theory analyses revealed that some items exhibited distinctive item difficulty and discrimination patterns across groups. Findings provide comprehensive psychometric evidence supporting the use of the SEDS-Brief among SGD adolescents and highlight directions to enhance its ability to capture emotional distress.

Social Emotional Distress Survey (10-item form)

Response options

0 = not true of me
1 = a little true of me
2 = pretty much true of me
3 = true of me
4 = very true of me

Items

In the last month…
1. I had a hard time breathing because I was anxious.
2. I worried that I would embarrass myself in front of others.
3. I was tense and uptight.

4. I had a hard time relaxing.
5. I felt sad and down.
6. I was easily irritated.
7. It was hard for me to get excited about anything.
8. I was easily annoyed and sensitive.
9. I was scared for no good reason.
10. It was hard for me to cope, and I thought I would panic.

SEDS-S (10-item) Distribution Characteristics

The SEDS-S (10-item) validation studies have used large, opportunity samples. See these studies for distributional data, including item means and response variances.

Dowdy et al., 2018: Results of CFA supported a one-factor model, SRMR = .03 and CFI = .97. Factor loadings remained strong ($\lambda = .61–.77$). Latent-level reliability for the SEDS-S internalizing problems factor was strong ($\boldsymbol{\omega} = .91$).

Rodríguez-Jiménez et al. 2025: CFA supported one-factor model—Female ($\omega = .89$), Male ($\omega = .87$)

De Caro et al. (2025): Omega coefficients were good, ranging from 0.89 (T0) and 0.91 (T1) and from 0.86 (males) to 0.89 (females), with values above 0.85. Test–retest correlation (5-month) was r = .71). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) validated a one-factor structure for the SEDS-S items, with acceptable fit indices: $\boldsymbol{\chi}^2 = 253.28$, $df = 35$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.07 (95% CI [0.06–0.08]); SRMR = 0.05. All factor loadings exceed 0.50. Measurement invariance was established for both sex and time.

Social Emotional Distress Survey-Brief (5-item form)

Response options

0 = Not at all true
1 = A little true
2 = Pretty much true
3 = Very much true

In the last month...

1. It was hard for me to get excited about anything.

2. It was hard for me to cope, and I thought I would panic.
3. I felt sad and down.
4. I had a hard time relaxing.
5. I was easily irritated.

SEDS-Brief (5-item) Distribution Characteristics

Distribution information for SEDS-Brief was derived from a population-level sample of 626,940 California students in grades 6-12, from every geographic region.

Raw Score Range = 0-15
M = 4.91, *SD* = 4.35, *Md* = *4*
Skew = 0.69, Kurtosis = -0.53
Alpha = .89, Omega = .83
Standard Score (SS): *Mean* = 100, *SD* = 15

Furlong et al. (2024): CFA supported a factor model, with invariance by gender and age (ω = .90)

Social Emotional Distress Survey-Brief Raw Score Distribution and Corresponding Standard Scores