

Legal Life Skills: for discussion at the 2022 SLI

OJEN believes that building legal capability in young people is one of the most effective preventative strategies for advancing access to justice.

What Is Legal Capability?

The term legal capability emerged as a way of thinking about what public legal education organizations could achieve through their work. The concept was influenced by research and writing on financial capability, which emphasized the skills, comfort with technical terms, and practical understanding that people would need to effectively manage their money.

Whether through the family courts, employment matters, civil disputes, landlord and tenant issues, or something else entirely, everyone will come into contact with the justice system at some point in their lives. For us at OJEN, **legal capability is the measure of a person's real, practical ability to manage the legal aspects of everyday life.** If a person knows how to manage conflict, seek out appropriate assistance, and has an understanding of legal processes, they are more likely to resolve their legal issues quickly and at a lower personal cost (using that term broadly here).

A young person's legal capability also depends on what resources and opportunities they have available to them. Building legal capability is a complex process. At OJEN, we design our public legal education programs to help build legal capability, but there are still many factors that affect a young person's legal capability that are beyond OJEN's control or mandate.

For example, if someone has very low literacy, precarious immigration status, or doesn't qualify for legal aid, these are barriers that we can't overcome. Sometimes, our school and community partners can help fill these gaps, because their activities can meet needs that OJEN cannot. It is important to us that we work collaboratively with our partners to ensure the best outcomes for young people. This allows us to make the most of our collective resources and focus our efforts.

At OJEN, we talk about building legal capability by focusing on three core elements:

1. We **share information** about the law, legal processes and where to go to get help;
2. We identify and encourage the **development of legal life skills** so that young people can use the information we share to manage legal problems that they encounter now and in the future;
3. We **create connections** between young people and legal professionals (e.g. bring young people to courthouses, invite legal professionals into schools and community spaces), so that young people can feel more comfortable and confident about navigating the legal system.

What are legal life skills?

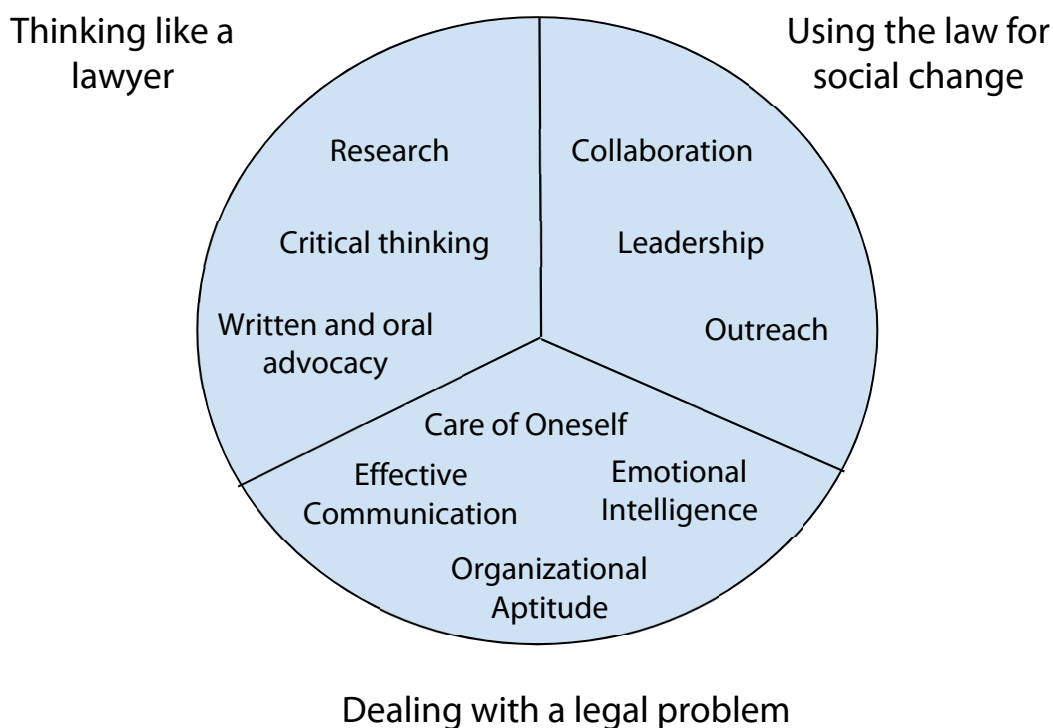
In many ways, “legal life skills” are an extension of basic life skills: practicable, psychosocial skills that help us navigate the challenges and demands of life. [UNICEF describes life skills](#) as “a set of abilities, attitudes and socio-emotional competencies that enable individuals to learn, make informed decisions and exercise rights to lead a healthy and productive life and subsequently become agents of change.”

Our organization sees “legal life skills” as the skills young people need to help them learn about the law, navigate their own legal issues and use the law to effect change. At OJEN, we are focusing on skills that are not only definable, but also those that can be taught and practiced.

We think about these skills in three main categories:

- Dealing with a legal problem;
- Thinking like a lawyer; and
- Using the law for social change.

Within these three main categories, we have identified **ten legal life skills**. Although the categories are discrete, the legal life skills we have identified often interact with and sometimes build upon one other. For example, the legal life skills connected to “using the law for social change” must build off the legal life skills contained in “thinking like a lawyer” and “dealing with a legal problem.”



OJEN's Core Legal Life Skills

Dealing with a legal problem

1. **Care of Oneself:** ensure that one's body, mind and spirit are cared for on a day-to-day basis, even in the midst of shifting circumstances or changing external factors.
 - We are mindful of the importance of certain pillars like sleep, food, physical activity, but want to focus specifically on skills and supports that can be identified and practiced.
 - For example, we might look at activities and exercises that have a young person map out their community of support, share their ways to destress and relax, learn and practice the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, map out legal processes so as to manage expectations, budget their non-financial resources, etc.
2. **Effective Communication:** accurately share, receive and consider information and express thoughts, opinions and concerns through verbal and written language and interaction with others.
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: active listening, body language awareness (of self and others), differences between passive/aggressive/assertive communication, word choice, tone, brevity, clarity, paraphrasing, non-judgmental statements, etc.
3. **Organizational Aptitude:** establish tasks and priorities in a simple, effective and efficient fashion, and with systems and supports in place.
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: note-taking, keeping documents, sequencing, putting events in chronological order, prioritizing, time management, budgeting, setting realistic time frames, managing expectations, etc.
4. **Emotional Intelligence:** perceive, use, understand, manage, and handle emotions (both one's own, and in some cases, other's emotions as well).
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: self-awareness, regulation of emotion, empathy, perspective-taking, openness to hearing other opinions, etc.

Thinking like a lawyer

5. **Research:** identify questions and select accurate and reliable paths/resources to resolve those questions.
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: knowing where to look for information (or how to start), evaluating sources of information, keeping track of what you've already consulted, close reading vs. skimming content - and when to use them, etc.

6. **Critical Thinking:** analyze information appropriately/adequately in order to come to an informed conclusion.
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: identifying/highlighting relevant information, spotting legal issues, recognizing contradictions and inconsistencies, determining author's/speaker's viewpoint, searching for opposing evidence, formulating specific questioning, analysis, etc.

7. **Written and Oral Advocacy:** use research and communication skills in an effective and persuasive manner in order to form an argument, or achieve a goal or desired outcome.
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: anticipating arguments, debating different viewpoints, identifying and using authorities effectively (precedent), distinguishing, selecting/focusing on key points, preparing submissions, speech writing and presentation techniques, etc.

Using the Law for Social Change

8. **Collaboration:** respect and seek the opinions of others, and see the value in bringing together the efforts of a group to work towards a common goal.
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: team building, goal setting, role definition, mandate creation, trust-building, etc.

9. **Leadership:** feel comfortable directing, managing and mobilizing, while being open to consultation and feedback throughout.
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: determining leadership style, knowledge of authorities, jurisdiction, precedents, creating short-term and long-term strategy, event planning, fundraising, mentoring, etc.

10. **Outreach:** identify external sources to contact for support and direction, and establish this contact in a useful, sustainable way.
 - Activities and exercises might focus on: drafting outreach communications, determining the "ask", researching relevant places to contact, creating community databases, conducting needs assessments, harnessing the power of social media, organizing a protest/event, etc.

For the session on Wednesday

In addition to your general response to the ideas in this document, we are sharing with you some discussion prompts in advance of our session next week. We would appreciate and value your input on the questions below!

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you agree with the selection and categorization of these ten skills? Do the three larger categories (dealing with a legal problem, thinking like a lawyer and using the law for social change) make sense as a way to think about developing these legal life skills? Is there anything missing that should be captured?
2. Which of these skills lend themselves to practice? Which would be harder to develop in a tangible way?
3. What are some ways that OJEN can contribute to the teaching of these skills in your classroom?
4. Is the way that we're considering and highlighting these skills and their development inclusive of young people's diversity and breadth of life experiences and identities?

Thank you for your time and perspectives!
We look forward to seeing you virtually on Wednesday, August 31st.