

Social and emotional learning programmes that work

Hundreds of controlled research studies conducted during the past few decades indicate that social and emotional learning programmes can improve pupils' academic performance and emotional development. **Joseph Durlak** and **Roger Weissberg** explore the evidence

EDUCATORS, POLICY MAKERS and the public agree that young people should leave school proficient in academic subjects, but should also be responsible, respectful, and able to work well with others. Schools play a critical role in working with families and communities to raise knowledgeable, happy, caring, contributing children when they successfully foster pupils' cognitive, social, and emotional development. Because schools have limited resources and are experiencing intense pressure to promote academic performance, educators must identify and effectively implement research-based approaches that produce multiple benefits.

A growing body of research has examined the impact on behaviour and school performance of educational, youth-development, preventive, and clinical interventions that promote social and emotional learning (SEL). Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and young people (as well as adults) acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to:

- Recognise and manage emotions;
- Set and achieve positive goals;
- Demonstrate care and concern for others;
- Establish and maintain positive relationships;
- Make responsible decisions; and
- Handle interpersonal situations effectively.

There are a variety of ways to promote pupils' social-emotional competence. SEL skills may be taught, modelled, and practised so that children and young people use them as part of their behavioural repertoire in dealing with daily life challenges. Some programmes teach pupils to apply SEL skills to prevent risky behaviours (eg, substance abuse, violence, and bullying) or to contribute to their class, school, and community (eg, service learning). Other approaches foster social-emotional development through establishing safe, caring learning environments involving

peer and family initiatives, improving classroom management and teaching practices, and whole school community-building activities. The focus of many SEL programmes involves school-wide and classroom-based promotion and prevention activities for all pupils. Some small-group SEL programmes address the social-emotional skills of children experiencing behavioural and emotional difficulties.

This article summarises the key findings and implications of three large-scale systematic reviews of outcome research on the impact of SEL programmes for school-age children and young people (ages 5–18).

Well-designed and carefully-executed programmes can increase positive pupil behaviour and academic performance and also reduce disruptive behaviour and emotional distress

The **Universal Review** examined the impact of universal school-based SEL interventions, that is, classroom-based or school-wide interventions that are appropriate for all pupils.

The **Indicated Review** focused on school-based early intervention or indicated programmes, meaning interventions that identify and work with pupils who are displaying early signs of behavioural or emotional problems.

The **After-School Review** evaluated SEL interventions conducted in after-school programmes, which primarily involved pupils without identified problems.

In other words, we evaluated SEL programmes across two different time periods and settings (during the school day and after school) and for two different types of pupil populations (those without any identified problems in the Universal and After-School Reviews and those with early identified problems in the Indicated Review).

Each review addressed the following research questions:

- Do SEL programmes significantly improve participants' skills, attitudes, behaviours and academic performance?
- Are SEL programmes effective in school and after school and for pupils with problems (Indicated Review) and without problems (Universal and After-School Reviews)?
- What features are associated with more effective SEL programmes?

Methods and results from the three scientific reviews

Each review evaluated published and unpublished studies in which children or adolescents receiving a SEL intervention were compared to a control group and there was at least one quantitative outcome assessing pupils' adjustment. Studies conducted around the world were included (the majority were done in the US) if they appeared in English by the end of 2008 and involved pupils aged 5–18 years. Collectively, the three reviews included

368 studies involving 322,245 children and young people.

Results of each review supported the value of SEL programmes in significantly enhancing multiple aspects of pupils' adjustment. For example, compared to controls at post-test, pupils in SEL programmes demonstrated superior SEL skills and prosocial attitudes, higher levels of prosocial behaviour, reduced levels of conduct problems and emotional distress, and enhanced academic performance including up to an 11 percentile gain in school achievement. In each review, SEL programmes were effective for pupils of all ages and from different ethnic groups, and in the Indicated Review were successful for those beginning to show behavioural or emotional problems. In other words, findings provided positive answers to our first two research questions.

To answer our third research question, we carefully examined which of several possible methodological and procedural features were associated with better

outcomes, although some variables could not be evaluated in each review because of the way the studies were conducted and reported. Nevertheless, data indicated that two factors increased the effectiveness of SEL programmes. Programmes that followed four evidence-based practices related to skill development (in the Universal and After-School Reviews) and those free of major implementation problems (in the Universal Review) were more effective than programmes not having these features. For example, programmes were more successful if they offered a sequential and integrated skills curriculum or programme, used active forms of learning to promote skills, focused sufficient attention on skill development, and established explicit learning goals. These practices form the acronym, SAFE, for sequential, active, focused and explicit. Results were also better when interventions were monitored and appeared to be free of major problems while they were being conducted.

Conclusion

Young people's social, emotional, and academic development is related, and promoting social and emotional development can lead to several desirable outcomes. Well-designed and carefully executed universal and indicated programmes – administered during school or after school – can increase positive pupil behaviour and academic performance and also reduce disruptive behaviour and emotional distress. It is critical to offer professional development to school and after-school personnel to deliver programmes that follow recommended practices for promoting skills and to monitor programme implementation.

Policy makers, educators, and the public should support the incorporation of evidence-based SEL programming into school and after-school settings. One important question for future research and practice is to determine the extent to which co-ordinated programming efforts (eg, Universal plus Indicated or During-School plus After-School) produce more powerful effects than when programmes are offered separately. We expect that combined programmes would have even more potential to promote positive school and life success for more pupils, and believe that such programmes should be delivered and carefully evaluated.

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What we know

- Well-designed SEL programmes offered during and after school can significantly improve pupil's attitudes, behaviours, and academic performance.
- Programmes benefit primary and secondary pupils from different ethnic groups, and those with or without behavioural and emotional problems.
- Programmes following recommended practices in developing skills (SAFE programmes) are more effective.
- Careful programme implementation increases the chances of success.

Further reading

Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, Dymnicki AB, Taylor RD, & Schellinger KB (in press), The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-analysis of School-based Universal Interventions. *Child Development*. Available from the first author.

Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, & Pachan M (in press), A Meta-analysis of After-school Programs that Seek to Promote Personal and Social Skills in Children and Adolescents.

American Journal of Community Psychology. Available from the first author.

Payton J, Weissberg RP, Durlak JA, Dymnicki AB, Taylor RD, Schellinger KB, & Pachan M (2008), *The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth-grade Students*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) www.casel.org.