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The Benefits of School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs: Highlights from a Major New Report

A new study reveals that students who participate in school-based programs focused on social and emotional learning (SEL) profit in multiple ways. Compared to students who do not experience SEL programming, they improve significantly with respect to:

1. Social and emotional skills
2. Attitudes about themselves, others, and school
3. Social and classroom behavior
4. Conduct problems such as classroom misbehavior and aggression
5. Emotional distress such as stress and depression
6. Achievement test scores and school grades, including an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement

These positive results do not come at the expense of performance in core academic skills, but rather enhance academic achievement. Moreover, the results are maintained among those studies that collect follow-up data in each of the above categories.

These are the results of a meta-analysis of 213 studies of SEL programs involving a broadly representative group of 270,034 students from urban, suburban, and rural elementary and secondary schools. Funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, and the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), the findings are the result of research that was carried out by Roger P. Weissberg at UIC and Joseph A. Durlak of Loyola University Chicago, with the assistance of graduate students Allison Dymnicki, Rebecca Taylor, and Kriston Schellinger. The meta-analysis project, spearheaded by the UIC Social and Emotional Learning Research Group and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a not-for-profit research organization, is the first meta-analysis of outcome research on social and emotional learning programs that take place during the school day. The full report will be published in the January-February issue of *Child Development* focusing on the theme "Raising Healthy Children," currently in press.

Background: Rigorous Criteria for Inclusion

In recent years, the SEL Research Group and CASEL have been analyzing research on more than 700 SEL programs that promote positive youth development in school, family, or community settings. The common thread in all of them is a focus on developing young people's skills that promote social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process of acquiring the skills to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of

others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations effectively. A growing body of research and literature supports the premise that effective SEL programming is a key to children's success in school and life (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004).

The senior authors have also released a groundbreaking report from the larger data set on the impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills (Durlak et al., 2010). That report documented that youth who participated in structured, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) after-school programs improved significantly in their feelings and attitudes, behavioral adjustment, and school performance. These findings were confirmed by the larger meta-analysis.

The new study adds significantly to what is known about the impact of SEL programming by evaluating school-based programs carried out by classroom teachers and other school staff. The researchers searched carefully to obtain a representative sample of published and unpublished studies. To be included in the meta-analysis, research studies had to meet the following criteria:

1. A major focus was on the enhancement of students' social and emotional development.
2. The intervention involved students 5-18 years old who did not have any identified problems, i.e., the intervention was directed at the general school population of students, not a specific "problem" group.
3. There was a control group.
4. Data were collected on at least one of six specific outcome areas related to students' (1) social and emotional skills, (2) attitudes toward self, others, and school, (3) positive social behaviors, (4) conduct problems, (5) emotional distress, and (6) academic performance.

The meta-analysis identified three major types of school-based SEL programs:

- *Classroom Programs Conducted by Teachers.* These usually took the form of a specific curriculum or set of lesson plans delivered within the classroom setting only.
- *Classroom Programs Conducted by Researchers.* These were similar to those conducted by teachers with the major difference that researchers administered the intervention.
- *Multi-Component Programs.* These types of programs added another component to classroom-based strategies that varied depending on the investigation—for example, a component involving parents or a school-wide component that stressed the importance of reorganizing school structures and practices in order to encourage and support students' positive development, e.g., through school climate improvement strategies.

Key Findings: Classroom Teachers and the Quality of Program Implementation Count

One major finding of the meta-analysis is that the overall group of SEL programs positively affected students in several areas. Students demonstrated enhanced skills, attitudes, and positive social behaviors following the intervention and also demonstrated fewer conduct problems and had lower levels of emotional distress. Although the SEL interventions required time in the school day, they did not detract from students' academic performance. **Across the studies evaluating academic outcomes, students scored 11 percentile points higher on standardized achievement tests, a significant improvement, relative to peers not receiving the program.**

The study also found that classroom programs conducted by teachers were effective in each of the six outcome areas and that multi-component programs (also conducted by school staff) were effective in four of the six outcome areas. Furthermore, only when school staff conducted the intervention did students' academic performance improve significantly. **The clear implication is that SEL programs can become a part of routine school practice; they do not have to be conducted by personnel from outside the school to achieve good results.**

Program implementation had a strong influence on outcomes. Implementation refers to how well an intended program is actually conducted once it begins. Implementation can be disrupted for various reasons, e.g., staff omit certain parts of the intervention, new staff arrive who need training, or unexpected developments alter the execution of the program. When such problems arose among the reviewed studies, positive results were obtained in only two areas: attitudes and conduct problems. But when no implementation problems were reported, programs achieved positive results in all six outcome categories. The implication is that careful planning must occur to monitor program implementation and to ensure the program is conducted as planned. **Put another way, if a program is not well-executed, the chances of it benefiting students are greatly diminished.**

The results from this and other research studies have important implications for education policy and practice. They indicate that well-designed, well-implemented, teacher-taught SEL programs can promote students' social-emotional development, behavior, and academic performance. However, the multiple benefits that students can receive from effective SEL programs are reduced when schools either do not adopt evidence-based programs or do not implement these programs successfully.

A clear implication of the new study is that effective SEL programming by school personnel must be supported by coordinated state and educational policies, leadership, and professional development to foster the best outcomes. A recent report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to Congress stated that Illinois has taken the lead on this front by introducing SEL standards as part of their student learning standards. Other states, such as New York, are following this direction. Combining sound educational policy and support to school personnel who deliver evidence-based SEL programming is an important strategy to maximize the social, emotional, and academic growth of all children and youth.

References to previous studies:

Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45,* 294-309.

Greenberg, M.T., Weissberg, R.P., O'Brien, M.U., Zins, J.E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M.J. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist, 58,* 466-474.

Zins, J.E., Weissberg, R.P., Wang, M.C., & Walberg. H.J. (Eds.). (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* New York: Teachers College Press.