

Social and Emotional Development in Schools

ABSTRACT:

In the past, schools have been viewed as a place for intellectual learning, while children's families were expected to provide the context for children's social and emotional development. New research and initiatives are beginning to show a number of positive outcomes for school programs that focus on social and emotional development in addition to academic learning. This is because each area of children's development is interdependent with the other areas. The push to integrate social and emotional learning with academic success establishes a need for parents and school to work together in partnership in order to best support students' development in every domain.

KEY TERMS: Social & Emotional Development; Cognitive Development; Holistic Development; Parent Engagement

WHY IS THIS OF INTEREST?

Many parents and teachers today would agree that "the primary purpose of schools is seen as preparing students to become knowledgeable, responsible, and caring citizens," (McCombs, 2004, p.25). But what are the ingredients that go into creating this type of education? In the past, schools have traditionally focused on their student's intellectual abilities and thinking processes (Lopes & Salovey, 2004); this domain of learning is sometimes referred to as "**cognitive development**". This has led to a "view that families are responsible for promoting social and emotional learning while schools are responsible for academic learning," (Mart, Dussenbury, & Weissberg, 2011, p.38) "**Social and emotional development**" is the domain of learning that refers to how children feel about themselves and others (Marotz & Allen, 2013), this includes skills such as those needed to recognize and deal with emotions, develop positive relationships, and manage conflict (Mart et al., 2011).

For many years the roles of home and schools have been segregated, but we now know that just as families can provide an important context for academic achievement, so too are schools important in fostering social and emotional development (Mart et al., 2011).

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THIS?

Reading, Writing & 'Rithmetic:

For many previous generations, schools existed to teach students skills in traditional subject areas such as reading, writing, and math, with limited attention paid to students' social and emotional learning needs (Lopes & Salovey, 2004).

Many things have changed about schools in recent decades. Today, children spend more hours in school per day, and more years in school over the span of their lives than many previous generations (Lopes & Salovey, 2004). The skills young people are expected have attained by the time they enter the work force have also changed. These are qualities such as teamwork, leadership, and relationship building, which may not be explicitly covered by traditional subject areas (Lopes & Salovey, 2004).



The Whole Child:

Current research from a variety of fields (biology, psychology, education, etc.) recognizes that the most meaningful educational experiences happen when cognitive learning happens simultaneously with emotional learning and activities (McCombs, 2004). That is to say, learning happens best when “the brain” and “the heart” so to speak are in sync.

The research states that intellectual and emotional learning are virtually inseparable as both are natural and vital to healthy human functioning. As McCombs (2004) states, “social and emotional skills are essential for the successful development of cognitive thinking and learning skills,” (p.24).

The Whole Environment:

This holistic perspective to children’s learning domains has also been applied to their learning environments. An important theory of child development was proposed by a psychologist named Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), called “Ecological Systems Theory”. This theory considers the complexity of the interactions between children’s various environments and how these different systems each influence children’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This theory is important because it brings light to the importance of the connection between children’s home and school lives. This connection has an impact on all areas of development, but is especially crucial for schools that aim to promote social and emotional learning. Studies have shown that the most successful social and emotional development education programs are those that focus on the connection between schools and home (Christenson & Havy, 2004; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2007).

Even more positive outcomes have been seen by programs that, in addition to connecting school and home, also reach out to the larger community (Durlak et al., 2007). Researchers have suggested that coordinating safe and nurturing environments across home, school, and community leads to positive outcomes across all domains (Christenson & Havy, 2004; Albright et al., 2011).

Academic Benefits

There have been a number of studies conducted to measure just how much social and emotional learning benefits children. This research has consistently shown that this type of education positively impacts students’ school achievement. For example, multiple studies found academic performance to increase by 11 percentile-points in schools with these programs (Durlak, et al., 2007).

Other schools with these programs also showed “improved grades, standardized test scores, and graduation rates; increased grade point average; and improved reading, math, and writing skills,” (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2004, p.15). In addition to these improvements were better attendance and dropout rates, as well as fewer suspensions, referrals, and grade retentions (Zins et al, 2004).

Not JUST Academic Benefits...

These improvements in academic outcomes are significant, but it is important to note that children who participate in social and emotional learning at schools experience benefits in more than just academic



achievement. These programs have also been shown to strengthen areas such as school connectedness, prosocial behaviours, physical health, and citizenship (Taylor & Dymnicki, 2007; Zins & Elias, 2007).

Researchers contend that healthy social and emotional development “is demanded by employers, is essential for lifelong success, and reduces the risk of maladjustment, failed relationships, interpersonal violence, substance abuse, and unhappiness,” (Zins & Elias, 2007, p. 237). These outcomes have significant implications for creating healthy and safe experiences for young people and giving them skills to overcome life’s challenges.

How DOES THIS CONNECT To START SMART STAY SAFE?



As the importance of social and emotional development in schools becomes more evident, many schools have taken steps to address this need through adapting classroom lessons and shaping a new school culture. The Start Smart Stay Safe (S4) program provides additional tools and resources to both schools and families for implementing social and emotional learning. One of the aims of S4 is to build resiliency in children, families, and communities, which is a big part of healthy development, and is strongly related to social and emotional development. By supporting children in their social and emotional development, we can help equip them with the skills to overcome life’s challenges.

S4 classroom experiences focus on important skills such as making healthy choices, empathy, effective communication, citizenship, and many others. All of these skills are involved with healthy social and emotional development.

Start Smart Stay also reinforces the complementary role of families in children’s education by extending opportunities for learning at home. The S4 program includes a variety of resources and activities that invite parents to partner with schools in supporting children in all domains of learning. This school-family partnership enhances children’s skill sets in all areas: social, emotional, academic, and beyond (Albright et al., p.2).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES?

The benefits of social and emotional education are truly varied and extend to all domains of children’s lives, including in their family and community life. Improved behavioural outcomes of these programs, such as reduced aggression, better conflict resolution, and more positive attitude (Zins et al, 2004) are important qualities for children in becoming active and contributing members of society. In addition to these skills, social and emotional education has been found to reduce rates of alcohol and drug use, sexually transmitted infections, and criminal behaviour (Zins et al., 2004). Reducing these outcome contributes to building healthy and safe communities.

“Family involvement also facilitates children’s cognitive, social, and emotional functioning and has been linked to increased self-esteem, improved behavior, and more positive attitudes toward school,” (Albright et al., 2011, p.2).

Families can find out what their child’s school is doing to promote social and emotional learning. This may be a school-wide program, or practices in individual classrooms. Parents can starts by speaking with their child’s classroom teacher to discover how this learning is being encouraged in their school, and to find out what opportunities and resources are available for families to support learning at home.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Through studying successful social and emotional development programs, researchers have identified several evidence-based practices for creating partnerships between schools and families. Read about out how these recommendations support the initiatives for families that are part of the Start Smart Stay Safe program:

Recommendations (from Mart et al., 2011, p.40)	S4 Activities and Resources
“ Family guides that explain social and emotional learning concepts”	Start Smart Stay Safe has created brochures and handouts containing information about social and emotional developmental milestones for different age groups and includes ideas that families can try at home to support this learning.
“ Home activities that provide opportunities for families and students to work together on learning activities that promote social and emotional learning”	Parents can keep an eye out for Family Connection Activities that may be sent home by children’s teachers. These are activities and discussion ideas that families and children can work through together to support the lessons children are learning in their classrooms.
“ Newsletters that keep families up to date on the social and emotional skills that their children are learning in school”	Keep an eye out for Start Smart Stay Safe newsletter updates that contain information about the S4 program, social and emotional development, key messages and activities to try from the program.
“ Workshops and informational sessions on topics related to social and emotional learning”	Parents and schools that take part in Start Smart Stay Safe can request a Family Session from a selection of topics that impact children, families, and schools. These sessions, facilitated by a police officer, provide families with ideas and strategies for addressing important issues while supporting social and emotional development in children.

“The question becomes not one of who should be responsible for which domains of development, but rather how can schools and families work together in coordinated ways to support success in all these areas?”
(Mart et al., 2011, p.38)





"The full potential of these efforts cannot be realized if schools and families continue to engage in separate, parallel efforts. Students succeed best when all the key adults in their lives work collaboratively to support them in all developmental domains," (Mart, Dusenbury, & Weissberg 2011, p.42).

Key Terms

Cognitive Development: "Addresses the expansion of a child's intellect or mental abilities...involves recognizing, processing, and organizing information and then using it appropriately" (Moretz & Allen, 2013).

Ecological Systems Theory: Suggests that human development is influenced by several interconnected environmental systems, which interact with each other and with the individual. Examples of these environmental systems include: home, school, community, country, and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Holistic Development: Children's different domains of development "are interwoven and interdependent during the developmental years and throughout life" (Moretz & Allen, 2013); development in each area is complemented by development in other domains, making it impossible to separate them.

Prosocial Behaviour: The act of helping other people without expecting compensation or reward in return.

School-Family Partnership: "A trusting relationship between families and schools, one that recognizes and respects each other's diverse styles, skills, and strengths," (Albright et al., 2011).

Social & Emotional Development: "The capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others," (Zins & Elias, p.234).

"Although the ABCs are essential, they seldom refer to autonomy, belonging, and competence."

Christenson & Hays, 2004, p.59



Social and Emotional Learning in School Leads to:

- 1) Improved student attitudes, including motivation and increased sense of belonging in school,
- 2) Positive behavioural changes, including reductions in bullying behaviours and risky health behaviours, and
- 3) Improvements to academic achievement

- Zins, Weissberg, Wang & Walberg, 2004



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