Teaching socioemotional skills for a safe and supportive school environment

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Teaching children socioemotional skills reduces bullying and peer violence in schools by helping students manage emotions, build empathy, and resolve conflicts peacefully. Programs can be particularly effective when teachers use inclusive teaching practices and parents model empathy and positive behavior at home.

Classroom in Turkey.

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Résumé

Schools shape children's social identities and socioemotional skills in addition to providing academic learning. However, schools often struggle to provide a safe and secure environment for students.[1], Bullying, peer violence, ethnic segregation, and social isolation can be detrimental to students' cognitive and social development and have long-term consequences for their mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. In 2025, every month, one in three students was bullied in school worldwide.[2] Many programs that teach students socioemotional skills, such as emotional regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution, aim to reduce violence by equipping students with the tools to manage interpersonal conflict. They may also aim to create a more conducive learning environment through improved classroom management and positive peer interactions.

A review of 33 randomized evaluations that aimed to develop students' socioemotional skills found that equipping students with skills to build relationships and resolve conflicts, take more action against bullying and violence, and interact more positively with peers, teachers, and parents improves schools' social climate, reduces violence, and supports students' well-being. Programs are most effective when they combine skill-building with shifts in peer norms, leverage socially influential students, and are

supported by teachers and parents who model inclusive and prosocial behavior. Most programs did not measure impacts on academic learning, and there were mixed results among those that did. Policymakers seeking to create safer schools should consider approaches that focus on improving children's socioemotional skills, peer dynamics, and supportive adult practices. Further research is needed to understand how to adapt socioemotional skills to different cultural contexts, the long-term impacts on academic learning and behaviors, and implementation at scale.

Résultats

Learning skills such as empathy, self-control, and perspective-taking make children kinder and more cooperative and less likely to engage in disruptive or aggressive behavior in the short term [1], [2], [3], [4], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], . Reducing negative behaviors alone is not sufficient to develop positive behaviors or improve students' learning [14], [15], [16], . However, teaching positive behaviors reduces negative behaviors [1], [3], [4], [11], [12], . For example, in Italy, a teacher-led program focusing on promoting harmony in the classroom reduced envy and spite among grade 3 students but did not increase their overall feelings of trust or kindness toward peers. This may be because negative and positive behaviors have different drivers [14], . While external controls like rules and the fear of consequences can reduce negative behaviors, positive behaviors often require internal motivation like morals and values.[3], [4]

In Turkey, a classroom program that taught grade 3–4 students to understand others' perspectives reduced violent incidents by 64 percent (from 1.88 to 1.21 violent incidents over ten school days) and led to a 50 percent drop in students being exposed to harm (from 1.5 to 0.75 events). Students also showed greater trust, altruism, and reciprocity toward both classmates and unfamiliar peers. Refugee students in the program improved their host (Turkish) language scores by 0.13 standard deviations. The program cost US$8.20 per student [3], , which was much lower than other similar socioemotional learning (SEL) programs in schools that cost on average around US$25 per student.[5], [4], [11], [12], [14], [30]

In Pakistan, a program for grade 6 students that used games and sports to build skills like confidence, communication, empathy, resilience, and cooperation reduced bullying by an additional 5.5 percentage points for boys and 37.2 percentage points for girls. Boys and girls were 14.2 percentage points (from 11.1 to 25.3 percent) and 18 percentage points (from 27.6 to 55.6 percent) less likely to bully others, respectively. Students' academic performance and attendance did not change. These results suggest that it may be easier to change girls' behavior than boys' behavior, either because of their higher maturity levels in adolescence or because peer violence between boys is more socially acceptable in some contexts [9].

A few studies show that these changes can persist years into the future, enabling additional medium- and long-term benefits, but more evidence is needed to understand these effects and their sustainability at scale [2], [12], [20], [33], . In a long-term study in Switzerland, students who received a program using interactive exercises to improve self-control, patience, problem-solving, and self-esteem enrolled in or graduated from university at higher rates seventeen years later [12], . While the program did not reduce aggressive or antisocial behavior [20], or improve students' standardized test scores [12], , students showed fewer impulsive and disruptive behaviors and stayed more focused in class—changes teachers observed and rewarded with better grades. This suggests that the program's long-term educational gains were driven by improved self-regulation in the classroom, not by changes in aggression or academic ability. The program cost US$67 per student and lasted up to two years [12] , , compared to the average annual cost of similar programs of US$25 per student per year. In Turkey, a study found that teaching grade 3–4 students to delay gratification and develop forward-thinking made them more patient in terms of their decisions and improved their grades. The effects on patience lasted up to three years after the program ended, especially among girls, academically stronger students, and those who committed more to long-term goals [2].

Students who do not participate in the SEL programs can still benefit from them [8], [18], [4], [17], [33], . Students learned better behavior, discouraged violence, built stronger relationships, and improved their study habits because of their classmates. In some cases, these effects spread to everyone in their class or school [8], [17], [18], , while in others, they mostly helped students who were already doing well academically [1], or spread within students' friend networks [4], . In El Salvador, students who did not receive a program focused on emotion regulation but were in a classroom where more than 70 percent of the students had received the program showed a 23.8 percentage point decrease in violence, had more positive attitudes toward school and learning, and improved their academic grades. These effects might have come from less disruption in the classroom, which created a better learning environment for all students, or because non-participating students learned from the positive behaviors of their peers. These effects were similar to those experienced by students who received the program themselves [8].

When programs work with adolescents, tapping into what matters to them—like what their friends think, their social standing, and their need for independence—they create a more welcoming and respectful environment for everyone [18], [4], [19], [1], [33], . These programs worked through students who were emotionally intelligent, well-connected, socially influential, popular among their peers, and able to make their own decisions. **Adolescents can also encourage each other to report violence** [18], [33], . A study in the United States found that when popular and more well-connected students in grades 5–8 publicly advocated against school conflict and violence, disciplinary incidents dropped by 25 percent within a year (from 2,695 to 2,012 incidents). The largest reductions occurred in schools with the highest proportion of popular students, emphasizing how they can draw attention to harmful norms and shift the perceptions and behaviors of peers through social influence [19], . In Turkey, an empowerment curriculum delivered by senior middle school students (selected as student teachers) to their younger peers, which cost US$20.02 per student teacher per year, reduced disciplinary incidents for high-intensity behavioral problems among student teachers by 3.5 percentage points (from 5.6 to 2.1 percent). The student teachers and their friends had higher perspective-taking abilities, sense of belonging, impulse control, and responsibility toward world issues such as crime, violence, and environmental disasters. When the student teachers repeatedly delivered positive messages to their juniors, the student teachers felt accountable for their social environment. As a result, they became more prosocial, avoided negative behaviors, supported their juniors, and improved their school's overall climate. By improving their school environment, they also did better academically, as more student teachers got into selective high schools after the program [4].

Parents can play an important role in helping their children understand their feelings, get along with others, and reduce negative behaviors [6], [17], [20], **but only when parents and students fully engage with and use the program content** [20], [21], [30], . High violence in homes may also affect student behavior negatively and reduce the impact of SEL programs [18] . In China, increasing parents' empathy and promoting positive parenting reduced grade 7–8 bullying and improved students' kindness, empathy, and tendency to help others. The children whose parents participated in the empathy education program were 5.3 percentage points less likely to bully others (from 32.8 to 27.5 percent) and were more willing to help those who experienced bullying. Boys stood up against bullying more often, suggesting that they had lower levels of empathy before the program and benefited from it more. Parents became more empathetic, spent more time with their children, and shifted toward a more democratic style of parenting, contributing to higher SEL skills and lower stress in their children.

However, educating parents in rural areas of China, where parents faced severe time and financial constraints, was ineffective at improving children's SEL skills [30], . Additionally, in Ireland, an after-school program that aimed to teach grade 4 students skills such as emotion regulation, problem-solving, and communication harmed student behavior and parenting styles. This was primarily due to low parental participation (parents attended an average of 2.34 sessions out of nine) and students learning negative behaviors from each other when instructed in groups. The findings highlight the need to maximize engagement by parents and children in the program and to design and pilot group-based after-school SEL programs with a great degree of care [21].

Few evaluations look at the impact of after-school SEL programs for youth exposed to high violence and at risk of being bullied or bullying others, with some exceptions [7], [8], [21], . In El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, a program that taught skills like emotion regulation through mindfulness training and character building to adolescents improved their behavior at school. Boys, older students, students with worse initial behaviors, students in high-violence areas, and students with higher stress saw the largest effects. Students in this program did not improve their math grades [7], ; however, another similar program in El Salvador, which had a stronger emphasis on impulse control, improved students' probability of passing a course by 3.4 percentage points [8], . Both evaluations found that students had better emotion regulation, but only in El Salvador did this translate into academic gains. In El Salvador, students who were more prone to engage in negative behaviors reduced them more when they were in a group with students less prone to such behaviors versus in a group with students like them. Such mixed groups helped the high-risk students without harming the low-risk ones, as the students could emulate the positive behaviors and learn the negative behaviors to avoid. However, this becomes detrimental when the proportion of high-risk peers in the group is too large [21], [25], . This suggests that the reduction in negative behaviors is driven more by structured exposure to prosocial peers and norms [25], [18], [3], [19], . The multicountry program had an average cost of US$296.5 per student, which was one-seventh of the cost of similar programs in the United States designed for youth who are vulnerable to violence, school dropout, and gang recruitment due to their exposure to highly violent environments [7]. Future research should examine the limits of school-based programs and the links between emotion regulation, better behavior, and impacts on learning.

Programs that include multiple actors (teachers, students, parents, and school staff) are more effective at improving students' well-being when they combine antibullying information for all students with specific support for those who bully or are at risk of becoming bullies [20], [13], [22], [23], [5], [11], [10], [31], [32], . These programs can be effective when delivered by many different actors: school staff, teachers, and parents [22], , state personnel and coaches [15], , and school counselors [11], . In one case, when comparing program delivery by teachers or new counselors, the counselors who were dedicated and trained personnel were more effective than teachers, though this approach was more expensive, costing US$15 per student versus US$7 per student when delivered by teachers [11], . Most evidence on multicomponent, whole-school approach programs comes from high-income countries. Future research should evaluate the contribution of each component, especially given the potential risks of involving some actors, such as teachers and school staff, who may be overburdened by additional requests on their time [1], [11].

A multicomponent antibullying program delivered by classroom teachers and school personnel for grades 4–6 students in Finland reduced how often students experienced bullying by 7.7 percentage points (from 16.6 to 8.9 percent). It improved students' well-being at school and bystander behavior by taking action against bullies. All students received the antibullying curriculum, including class discussions, role-playing exercises, and short films about bullying, and bullies and victims also received targeted support when cases of bullying were identified. This combination helped shift peer norms and empowered students to take action when faced with bullying [10], . Another evaluation of the same program showed that it improved peer perceptions and reduced students' anxiety and depression [23], . The Finnish program cost an additional approximately US$425 per student over nine years and was more cost-effective when it ran for nine years rather than three to six years.[6] Six of the seven studies of these multicomponent programs did not measure academic learning outcomes. Future research should study the mechanisms linking improvements in students' school environment and their academic learning.

Teachers' attitudes and classroom strategies can either build inclusive, supportive environments or reinforce bias and exclusion, affecting students' behavior, well-being, and social development [24], [14], . Giving teachers feedback about how students interact with each other—and helping them understand why it's important to prevent kids from feeling left out—can be a cost-effective way to make classrooms more inclusive and reduce harmful behavior. In Turkey, with a one standard deviation increase in teachers' ethnic bias, refugee students in grades 2–4 reported being bullied 5 percentage points more often and

scored 0.14 standard deviations lower on Turkish language assessments. Teachers' exclusionary practices, such as seating refugee students at the back of the classroom and failing to recognize them as "teacher's favorites," drove those outcomes [24], . In Italy, encouraging teachers to adopt inclusive practices—such as forming mixed-ability and ethnically diverse activity groups—led to increased cross-group friendships and reduced students' expressions of envy and spite, particularly toward immigrant peers. Socially isolated students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds benefited most from the program, as they were less supported by teachers before the program [14].

Skills-based training for teachers can increase their support for students and improve the classroom environment [16], [24], [14], [26], [29], **as well as academic outcomes** [27], [30], **in the short run, but more research is needed to understand if the impacts last.** Some teacher training programs had no impact on class-wide aggression or student conduct [28], , while one program improved student behavior [29], that persisted six months after the program ended [27], . In Jamaica, a teacher training program focused on positive behavior reinforcement and classroom management reduced teachers' use of corporal punishment and improved the emotional climate of classrooms [16], [26], [27], . In multiple programs, students of trained teachers improved their oral language, self-regulation [16], [28], , and school attendance [28], [29], . Evidence on math, reading, and spelling achievement was mixed [16], [28], . Together, these evaluations indicate a sequenced pathway in which improved teacher practices first reshape classroom environments and then strengthen children's socioemotional and cognitive skills, with reductions in aggression and gains in academic achievement over a longer horizon [16], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30]. Additional research is needed to understand what teaching skills affect student well-being and peer dynamics in the classroom. In Bangladesh, teachers who were asked to implement a behavior management program rather than opting into it reported higher frustration and lower mental well-being after the program, suggesting that these types of programs may overwhelm teachers with lower initial levels of motivation and skills [1], . Teachers with low motivation or ability may struggle to help students follow good behavior and learn, highlighting the need for a better understanding of teacher incentives, skills, and well-being in efforts to improve school climate. While teachers may need a higher initial time investment for training in such programs, overtime pay and peer teacher support can help reduce the costs to teachers [30], . Measuring implementation and teacher behaviors for fidelity to program design is important to ensure that SEL programs do not fail or have negative impacts, especially as they scale [30], [1].

Table A . Intervention content for students

Intervention content for students	Studies
Socioemotional skills	
Empathy	6, 9, 10, 22, 23
Communication/expressing feelings	9, 12, 20, 21, 22, 31, 32
Calmness/managing emotions	7, 8, 9, 15, 21, 25, 31, 32
Self-control/patience	2, 7, 8, 12, 20, 21, 25, 30, 31, 32
Problem-solving	11, 12, 20, 21, 22, 31, 32
Self-awareness	7, 21, 25, 30

Intervention content for students	Studies
Prosocial skills	1, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 20, 22, 23, 30
Perspective-taking	3, 21, 25, 32
Conflict resolution	5, 9, 13, 15, 21, 22
Decision making	8, 12, 20
Self-esteem	12, 20, 31, 32
Relationship building	1, 5, 8, 11, 13, 15, 30, 31, 32
Morals, rules, and manners	7, 12, 13, 20, 31, 32
Goal setting	8, 15
Self-persuasion	4
Taking responsibility/leadership	1, 4, 8, 9, 19, 33
Positive attitudes toward school	8
Mental well-being & seeking support	7, 22
Focus and concentration	7
Confidence	9, 23
Resilience	9
Critical thinking	4, 9, 21, 22
Information about bullying	10, 11, 13, 18, 22, 33
Reporting/less bystander behavior	10, 13, 18, 19, 22, 23, 33

Sector chair(s) or Academic lead(s)

Sule Alan

Insight author(s)

Anushka Bansal

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