

Social and Emotional Learning Programs for Adolescents

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

Adolescents face many challenges as they transition into young adults. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs and supports may be of value to them as they navigate the changes and transitions in their lives. This article explores whether SEL programs work for adolescents, and if so, how effective they are and under what conditions.

There are three models of SEL programs. The skills model is based on instruction in specific skill development. The climate model offers a supportive, positive emotional climate. The mindsets model focuses on helping young people develop belief systems or mindsets that, in turn, cause them to either use or not use their skills.

The author reviews a variety of programs and finds that although SEL programs can improve teen lives, typical skills-based SEL programs are generally ineffective for middle adolescents (ages 14 to 17). The effective programs for this age group focus on mindsets and climate.

METHODOLOGY

The author reviewed various SEL programs for youth, both effective and ineffective. The review of effective programs was not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, the author selected examples that: show initial promise, illustrate a different aspect of the proposed theoretical model, include some evidence of mechanisms of the proposed theory, and might guide the development of more effective programs.

KEY FINDINGS

The skills model appears to be less effective with teens than with younger children. The climate model can be powerful but does not necessarily translate into positive behaviour when children exit the program or school. The mindsets model is the most promising — its effects stay with young people over time.

The evidence suggests that the ideal way to support adolescents in developing SEL skills “is to create a supportive emotional climate that also teaches young people mindsets they can apply when they eventually

KEYWORDS

social emotional learning, positive youth development, youth programs

leave that climate” (Yeager, 2017, p. 76-77).

The three main conclusions are as follows:

1. Effective universal SEL programs can improve young people’s lives by preventing catastrophic outcomes (e.g. unwanted pregnancy, trouble with the law, dropping out of high school, etc.) or encouraging greater thriving (e.g. lowering stress, increasing health, etc.).
2. Typical, skills-focused SEL programs appear to be effective for children yet ineffective with middle adolescents. The evidence is less clear for early adolescents (ages 10 to 14).
3. Effective programs make adolescents feel respected by adults and peers. They make it possible for them to gain status from adults they respect.

Effective programs:

- Harness adolescents’ desire for status and respect;
- Create a more respectful climate that reduces adolescents’ experiences of being disrespected;
- Train teachers to create respectful environments. Authentic relationships with adults achieved by honouring young people’s desire for respect can lead to behaviour changes.
- Blunt the power of peer threats to status and respect. Programs can create this mindset by teaching teens that embarrassment or peer disrespect are not lasting, life-altering experiences
- Employ the incremental theory of personality. The entity theory of personality is the belief that people’s personalities are fixed and unchangeable. The incremental theory of personality is the belief that personality is malleable. The incremental theory of personality has been shown to promote greater SEL resilience.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The author presents 3 recommendations for research, policy, and practice:

1. Differentiate recommendations by age. Program effects can vary widely by age group.
2. Find ways to make environments more respectful. Programs that focus on teaching adolescents coping skills or habits have shown weak evidence of efficacy. Effective programs work indirectly by focusing on making the environment more respectful.
3. Think carefully about what is measured: It might be more informative to measure perceptions of

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This article reviews various Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs for adolescents to explore their effectiveness. Skills, climate, and mindsets models of SEL programs are discussed.

the psychological climate rather than students’ SEL skills; It isn’t clear that SEL skills can be taught by high school teachers in the short-term, so it may be unrealistic to expect teachers to be accountable for their students’ SEL skill scores; Current SEL skills measures are problematic as most are based on self-report instruments.

“[Effective SEL programs] find ways to motivate young people in terms of the values that matter most to them, and they try to change how young people see the world - their mindsets. Effective programs align the adult-sanctioned healthy choice — not getting pregnant, not getting arrested, etc. — with peer-sanctioned sources of status and respect like freedom, autonomy, or mattering. These programs do this both in how they talk to young people — by offering opportunities for authentic choice and input — and in what they teach — by helping young people envision a desirable future as the kind of person who makes healthy choices”

(Yeager, 2017, p. 79)

RECAP

The author finds that effective SEL programs can improve young people’s lives. The programs that are effective for teens between the ages of 14 and 17 harness young people’s developmental motivations and focus on mindsets and climate.

APA CITATION

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