

With A Little Help from My Friends:

The Importance of Peer Relationships For Social-Emotional Development



This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the need for research, practice and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

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Executive Summary

Positive peer relationships make critical contributions to healthy social-emotional development. Children benefit from the social and emotional support that friends offer, and they learn important social skills by interacting with peers. Yet successfully navigating the social world of peers can be challenging. All children experience occasional social stressors and peer conflicts, and 10 to 15 percent experience serious and chronic peer difficulties, including rejection, social exclusion, and victimization.^{1,2} Making and keeping friends, and dealing with peer group dynamics, requires both personal skills (e.g., understanding and managing one's feelings, controlling one's impulses) and interpersonal skills (e.g., understanding others, communicating effectively, negotiating and problem-solving). Interacting with peers helps to build these skills. Unfortunately, children who struggle with delays or deficits in social-emotional skills are often rebuffed by peers, limiting their opportunities for positive peer interactions and pushing them further to the margins of the peer group with negative consequences for their well-being. Key findings from intervention research indicate that social-emotional programming can boost the social-emotional skills of all children, support individual children who have more intensive social needs and improve their peer relationships, and create peer contexts that are more tolerant and supportive of individual differences.

Social-Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning^{4,5} has identified five inter-related competencies that comprise core social-emotional competencies:



Self-Awareness



Self-Management



Social Awareness



Relationship Skills

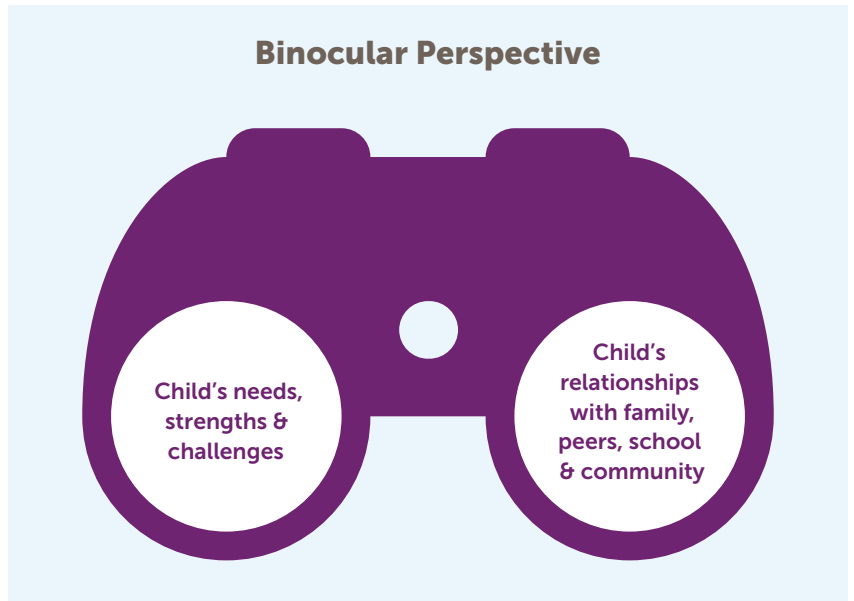


**Responsible
Decision-Making**

All these competencies are integral to successful peer interactions and develop, in part, in the context of peer interactions.

This research brief highlights findings from recent studies on peer relationships in childhood and adolescence with a focus on both the positive and negative processes that shape social-emotional development. It summarizes what is known about effective social-emotional learning and social skill coaching programs that have proven effective in improving both individual skills and peer relationships in school settings. Effective interventions take a binocular perspective, including activities designed to support individual children’s social-emotional skill development, and activities designed to alter negative peer dynamics and foster positive peer attitudes toward all classmates.³

In a binocular perspective, one lens is focused on building the social-emotional skills of individual children. Effective programs include universal (tier 1) programs delivered by teachers to whole classrooms, and more focused tier 2 and tier 3 programs designed to promote the social-emotional skills of children experiencing difficulties in their social adjustment and peer relations. These efforts involve systematic instruction and guided opportunities with the supports required to provide children with the skills, capacities, and social cognitions to enable them to interact optimally.



The other lens of the binocular perspective involves efforts to improve *social architecture*³ which is the process of strategically organizing children’s peer group experiences to promote positive peer dynamics and disrupt negative ones. Understanding is emerging around the various ways in which teachers’ attunement to individual students’ needs and peer group dynamics and their corresponding classroom management strategies and grouping practices affect classroom dynamics.⁶

This brief reviews what is known about effective strategies to boost children’s social-emotional skills and promote positive peer group dynamics. It also identifies future challenges for program development and research, including more extensive testing of interventions that can improve peer group dynamics, extend beyond the school walls, address the transition from peer interactions to romantic relationships, and explore tailored programs for children who are at increased risk for life-long social adjustment difficulties.

Introduction

Decades of research confirm the important and unique role that peer relationships play in children's development. Due to recent social-cultural changes, children have more contact with peers than ever before, increasing opportunities for peer influence. With over 60% of US mothers working outside the home, the majority of children are immersed with peers in daycares, schools, and after school programs from early childhood through adolescence.⁷ The average duration of schooling for US children has increased to almost 16 years,⁸ extending socialization within school-based peer groups. In addition, with digital connections through social media, potential time with friends has extended to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. These trends highlight the importance of peer relationships in children's lives and their potential to influence social-emotional development.

From the first years of life, children are interested in peers. By the preschool years, children's social, cognitive, language, and emotional capacities are sufficiently developed to support increasingly intentional and coordinated peer interaction. At age three, most peer interaction involves parallel play, as children imitate each other and take turns with play materials. By age five or six, this parallel play transforms into increasingly coordinated thematic play. To participate effectively in complex play, children must learn to communicate and negotiate with others, building critical skills that lay the foundation for later peer experiences.⁹

In the middle childhood years, children must increasingly work with other students in the classroom, and interact effectively on the playground and during lunch. Peer play is increasingly rule-based, and peer relationships are multi-layered, including close friends, other playmates, and broader social networks. In these increasingly complex social contexts,



children who can take the perspective of others, understand subtle social cues, manage their emotions, and control their impulses and aggressive behaviors experience more positive peer involvement and a sense of social belonging.¹⁰ Conversely, children who have not developed age-appropriate social-emotional skills struggle to initiate and sustain meaningful relationships with peers at school, particularly if they are socially awkward or volatile emotionally and unpredictable in their behavior.^{11,12} Children without these skills are often rejected by peers and pushed to the margins of the social group — a position that is maintained through bi-directional negative interactions with peers and linked to the development of conduct problems.¹³

In adolescence, peer relations play a strong role in determining youths' sense of social belonging and self-worth. Adolescence brings with it rapid changes in physical, cognitive, and emotional development and increases in autonomy, which provide adolescents with new opportunities for social-emotional development and an enhanced sense of identity.¹⁴ Although peers provide support, acceptance, and opportunities for engagement, they can also draw youth into risky behavior at a time when some youth are particularly susceptible to peer pressure.¹⁵ Experiences with friends and peer groups in adolescence prepare youth for romantic relationships, in which they continue to develop capacities for intimacy, empathy, perspective taking, problem solving, and dealing with emotions such as anger and jealousy.¹⁶ Adolescents who are not included in friendship groups may lack the opportunities to learn and practice these relationship skills that are foundational for initiating and sustaining healthy romantic relationships and avoiding dating violence.¹⁷

Thus, peer relationships are highly salient from the preschool years through adolescence, and the social-emotional competencies developed through peer relationships in childhood and adolescence accumulate to lay the foundation for well-being and healthy, supportive relationships in adulthood.¹⁸ Positive peer relations in middle childhood significantly predict romantic relationship satisfaction and quality in early adulthood, as well as adult work competence, including interacting effectively on the job and having harmonious relationships with coworkers.¹⁹ Positive peer relations in adolescence predict better health and lower healthcare costs in early adulthood.²⁰ Children with under-developed social-emotional competencies are often marginalized by peers and experience increasing social alienation over time, along with increases in emotional distress and antisocial behaviors.^{21,22}

Therefore, it is essential that parents, schools, and community organizations attend to the dynamics of children's peer groups and work to promote positive social-emotional development. Schools in particular are in a position to promote positive peer relations and social-emotional development through prevention and intervention initiatives. These include efforts in two complementary areas: the provision of instruction and supports that build social-emotional skills, and the orchestration of groups and activities that promote positive and inclusive interactions, and mitigate the marginalization of those who find social interactions difficult.

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Key Findings

Peer relationships provide a unique context in which children learn a range of critical social-emotional skills, such as empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving strategies.

In comparison to adult-child relationships, peer interactions have unique characteristics that contribute to their developmental influence. With peers, children are interacting with relative equals. The frequent conflicts that occur within peer interactions provide opportunities to learn about getting along with others, promoting the understanding of others' perspectives and feelings and the growth of problem-solving skills.¹⁰

Interacting successfully with peers requires and builds relationship skills, which CASEL defines as the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. Relationship skills include: the ability to communicate, listen, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed. Although these social capacities develop within an individual child, they are acquired, practiced, and honed during interactions with peers.

Given their unique nature and pervasiveness, peer relationships play an important role in how and when children acquire relationship skills. Children learn to engage prosocially and play cooperatively with peers: about three-quarters of peer-directed behaviors on the school playground are prosocial.¹² Children learn to synchronize interactions through reciprocal behaviors – responding to prosocial behaviors with prosocial behaviors and to antisocial behaviors with either antisocial or prosocial behaviors.¹² As children learn to manage their emotions, they become increasingly able to deflect others' aggression and resolve peer conflicts in positive ways.¹² Positive peer influences on social-emotional development extend to online peer interactions. Developing technologies are increasing connectivity among youth. Some children who are isolated, and/or struggling to fit in with peers at school are able to find peers to connect with through social media.²³

Strengthening children's social-emotional skills and fostering positive peer interactions in childhood can have long-term benefits. In one long-term study, Huesmann and colleagues²⁴ found that popularity with peers and being low in peer aggression at age 8 predicted higher occupational status at age 48. Another long-term study found that children's social competence rated by kindergarten teachers predicted their educational attainment, employment stability, and mental health at age 25.²⁵ These findings provide evidence that peer relationships, in addition to parent-child relationships, play a critical role in social-emotional development and shape the competencies needed to be effective at work and in close relationships in adulthood.

Key Relationship Skills⁴



communication



listening



cooperating
with others



resisting
inappropriate
pressure



negotiating conflict
constructively



seeking and
offering help

Peer relationships can also contribute negatively to social-emotional development through bullying, exclusion, and deviant peer processes.

Despite the generally positive nature of peer interactions, the peer context can also expose children to high levels of stress and hostility. Children who have not developed adequate social-emotional skills are particularly vulnerable. Poor social-emotional skills can be both a cause and consequence of strained peer relationships. If children have trouble managing their feelings and controlling their impulses, they are less attractive as playmates and become increasingly excluded from the group.¹ Peers provide immediate negative feedback when a child has stepped out of line, reacting aggressively toward others or with intensive distress. Sometimes this feedback helps children self-correct their behavior; but about one-third of the time, it escalates the aggression or distress.¹²

When they are pushed to the periphery of the social circle, unskilled children lack opportunities to interact with skilled peers. Instead they associate with each other, responding to each other in ways that can amplify their skill deficits and reinforce aggressive behaviors.²⁶ Having friends who are aggressive is linked to increases in bullying, delinquency, substance use, violence, and maladjustment in adulthood.²⁶ Deviant peer processes extend into the online world; for example, exposure to friends' online pictures of partying or drinking predicts increases in both smoking and alcohol use.

Bullying, in which a stronger or more competent peer initiates verbally or physically aggressive behavior toward another, also impairs social-emotional development and adjustment. Children with limited social-emotional capacities are often victims of bullying, which increases their risk of developing subsequent mental health problems, including anxiety and depression.²⁸ When vulnerable children experience repeated exclusion and victimization by peers, they lose their sense of safety and belonging within the peer group. One longitudinal study revealed that being bullied frequently by peers as a child contributed to poor social, health, and economic outcomes evident nearly four decades later.²⁹ These findings highlight the pressing need for prevention and early intervention programs to guard against negative peer processes, particularly rejection, exclusion, and bullying, and to promote positive peer cultures that support healthy social-emotional development for all children and youth.

Universal, school-based, social-emotional learning programs provide a strong foundation for promoting healthy social-emotional development and creating positive peer cultures.

Universal or tier 1 social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are designed for teachers to implement at the classroom level. The goal is to teach all children social-emotional skills as a means of promoting well-being and preventing behavioral and emotional problems. For example, the PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) Curriculum³⁰ provides teachers with lessons to promote emotional literacy, self-control, social competence, and interpersonal problem-solving skills. In randomized-controlled trials, PATHS increased

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student social competence and academic engagement, and reduced rates of disruptive behavior problems, improving the peer reputations of children in intervention classrooms. Another classroom-based SEL program, Second Step provides tools, teaching aids, activity guides, and resources to teach children how to make friends, manage their feelings, solve problems and deal with peer pressure. In a randomized-controlled trial of the elementary program, Second Step³² promoted prosocial goals and reduced aggressive behavior problems.³³ Similarly, students who received intervention in the middle-school program were 42% less likely to report physical aggression than students in control schools.³⁴ A key to the effectiveness of universal SEL programs may be their focus on self-regulation. Studies of PATHS have demonstrated that improvements in student self-control led to reduced behavior problems.³⁵

School-based bullying prevention programs have also proven effective at promoting prosocial behaviors and counteracting negative peer influences. For example, the Finnish KiVa school-based bullying prevention program includes classroom lessons focused on peer processes that prevent bullying.³⁶ In addition, teachers give individualized support to children and youth who have been involved in bullying or been victimized by peers. Selected bystanders are challenged to support victimized students and stand up against bullying. In a randomized controlled trial, the KiVa bullying program in grades 4 to 6 was successful in reducing the prevalence of bullying by 17% and victimization by 30%, compared with control schools.³⁷

Additional information about evidence-based SEL and bully prevention programs is available on the following websites:

1. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):
<https://casel.org/resources-guides/>
2. Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development:
<https://www.blueprintsprograms.org>
3. What Works Clearinghouse:
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>
4. Crime Solutions:
<https://www.crimesolutions.gov>
5. Effective Child Therapy:
<https://effectivechildtherapy.org>



Children experiencing peer difficulties often need additional, systematic, and intensive social skill coaching.

Approximately 15 percent of students experience significant peer problems and need additional tier 2 or tier 3 intervention to address their social skill deficits and peer difficulties.² Tier 2 interventions typically involve group work with children who are experiencing peer difficulties, and tier 3 interventions typically add individualized programming to address skill deficits or behavior problems that are undermining peer relationships. A large body of research supports the value of social skill coaching programs for children with significant peer problems. Coaching programs teach skills by presenting skill concepts and models, and then giving children supported opportunities to practice skills in a small group context with reinforcement and corrective feedback. Reviewing 6 meta-analyses conducted between 1987 and 2003, involving 338 studies and more than 25,000 children between 3 and 18 years of age, Gresham and colleagues² concluded that social skill coaching is an effective intervention for high-risk students with social adjustment problems, with an overall mean effect size of .29 (range = .19-.40), corresponding to an improvement rate of 65% among the children who received SST compared to 35% among children in the control groups.

Many tier 2 and tier 3 programs focus on improving children's abilities to manage strong feelings and control impulses, with the goal of reducing disruptive and aggressive behaviors that undermine peer relationships. In working with at-risk children, programming often extends to parents to help them learn skills to effectively support their children's self-regulation and social-emotional learning. For example, the Coping Power program supports children in developing social competence and self-regulation, with complementary sessions to promote positive parental involvement. A randomized trial of this intensive group program for aggressive children was effective in improving school behavior and reducing antisocial behavior.³⁸ The outcomes were enhanced when the complementary parent program was included with the children's group program. Stop Now and Plan (SNAP) is a similar social-emotional development program for boys and girls with antisocial behavior problems, as well as their parents. In a 12-week program, children are taught cognitive and behavioral skills and given opportunities to practice applying the skills. Parents participate in parallel sessions focused on managing their emotions and effective parenting strategies. Compared to treatment as usual, boys randomly assigned to the SNAP program had lower aggression, conduct problems, and externalizing behavior problems.³⁹ The SNAP program has been adapted for girls, who showed similar changes in aggression, conduct problems, and internalizing problems compared to a wait list control group.⁴⁰

Effective tier 2 and tier 3 programs have also focused on more heterogeneous groups of children experiencing peer difficulties. For example, S.S.GrIn^{41,42} was developed to serve children who are rejected or bullied by peers by providing social skills training in small group sessions held at school. Sessions focus on building self-confidence, along with skills related to communication, cooperation, negotiation, and coping effectively with peer pressure and teasing. A randomized trial produced significant benefits for third-grade children, including increases in peer liking and feelings of self-efficacy and reductions in social anxiety and antisocial affiliates. Similarly, the Fast Track Friendship Group program provides skill building lessons in small groups for elementary school students with serious peer

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difficulties, including cooperation, self-control, fair play, social problem-solving, and stress management. Lessons draw from randomized trials that have demonstrated positive effects on social skill acquisition and improved peer relations for disliked children who were socially withdrawn⁴⁴ and/or aggressive.^{45,46} In these programs and others like them, delivery in a small group setting provides opportunities for activity-based practice in social interaction and social problem-solving, improving social-emotional skills, self-confidence in social settings, and contributing to improved peer perceptions of children identified as at risk.⁴⁷

Peers can be powerful forces that facilitate or alternatively undermine group programs.

As indicated above, there is substantial evidence that social skills training with small groups of at-risk children is effective not only in scaffolding skill development, but also in creating experiences to enhance the capacity to engage positively with peers. Research documents that social skill training in small groups is more effective than working with children individually.^{44,48} Peer partners who participate in social skill training sessions also benefit socially, becoming more socially responsive and increasing their liking for the target child.⁴⁹ Because rejection processes involve transactions between unskilled children and their peers, training peers to be more positively responsive to children who have social-emotional difficulties enhances the classroom climate for all children.

At the same time, aggregating aggressive children in social skills groups can create problems that exacerbate social difficulties rather than promoting social-emotional learning.⁵⁰ Peer contagion or deviancy training has been documented in naturally occurring peer settings. For example, observations of bullying on the school playground revealed that when a



bystander reinforced bullying by joining in, the child who initiated the bullying became more aggressive and more aroused.⁵¹ It appears to be the modelling and reinforcement of deviant behavior that serves to maintain or exacerbate negative behaviors.²⁶ Similar peer escalation dynamics, when they unfold in social skills groups, both impede social-emotional learning and are linked to higher levels of aggression after the intervention.^{22,47}

Skilled group leaders using highly structured programs can generally manage negative contagion effectively. For example, Lavalley and colleagues⁴⁷ found that peer escalation was generally not a problem for 75 percent of children in “Friendship Groups” for aggressive and disruptive children and only an occasional problem for 20 percent. However, 5 percent of children received regular attention for their disruptive behavior. For this reason, many school-based social skill training programs avoid grouping aggressive children together and instead group children who have diverse social needs or use non-aggressive peer partners.^{43,41}

Future Directions and Research Needs

There is a growing body of research to support the importance of multi-tiered social-emotional programs within the school curriculum. However, more research is needed on optimal developmental timing to acquire social-emotional competencies and on the effective mechanisms of change through prevention and intervention. Recent research is beginning to identify types of children who might need individual as well as group intervention.^{52,53} Increased understanding of mechanisms related to different outcomes and for different types of children and youth will inform the development of more tailored and effective prevention and intervention efforts, with key policy implications.

Programs focused on building children’s social-emotional skills have far out-paced the development and testing of programs that can improve peer group dynamics and reduce bullying and group divisions such as racial tensions. To be maximally effective with a binocular approach, greater attention must be paid to strategies that improve peer group dynamics. Some of these may be quite simple. For example, one study found that adjusting seating arrangements so that children who did not like each other were seated next to each other had positive effects. The simple decrease in distance led to higher likeability ratings for those children perceived most negatively by peers and a general reduction in victimization and social withdrawal in the classroom.⁵⁴ Additional studies are needed to understand how to improve teachers’ attunement to peer dynamics and individual students’ needs and how to help them positively influence these dynamics using the “invisible hand” of classroom management and grouping strategies.⁶ In addition, to ensure effective social-emotional learning for the most at-risk children and youth (the tier 2 and 3 efforts described above), it is important to study the training, coaching, and supervision of teachers and intervention providers. It is critical to understand how intensive their training needs to be to achieve effective implementation of the program and children’s engagement, as well as sustained use of the program in years following the training. A greater understanding of what contributes to strong implementation and sustained use of these programs can have a meaningful public health impact.

There is a growing body of research to support the importance of multi-tiered social-emotional programs within the school curriculum.

Social-emotional development and healthy peer relationships are not the responsibilities of schools alone. To promote healthy development of all children and youth, educational, social service, and mental health sectors need to coordinate efforts to ensure that all children have the essential social-emotional capacities for an optimal future. The need is especially pronounced for those who are struggling and vulnerable to negative influences through peer interactions, leaving them at risk for a lifetime of social and health difficulties. Recent studies suggest considerable promise in the potential for families to help support children struggling with peer difficulties. For example, Mikami and colleagues⁵⁵ have tested an intervention in which they trained parents of children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder to be friendship coaches. Positive skill and peer relationship outcomes were found for children whose parents had learned how to create a positive relationship with their own children and then how to support their children in relating to peers. A second example is the Children's Friendship Training program, a manualized intervention for parents that helps them strengthen the social skills of their children with autism spectrum disorders. A randomized trial revealed positive effects on social skills and expanding friendship networks.⁵⁶ More research is needed on strategies for adults to shape peer dynamics for positive social-emotional development, which are equally important in families, youth-serving organizations, and sports teams, where parents, leaders, and coaches can play a critical role teaching respect and positive engagement.

Social-emotional development and healthy peer relationships are not the responsibilities of schools alone.

Developmental studies have shown that peer relationships form the foundation for romantic relationships in adolescence.⁵⁷ Youth who struggle with social-emotional capacities not only have problems with same-sex peers in elementary school, but also have difficulties creating and sustaining harmonious relationships with romantic partners. There are, however, relatively few evidence-based programs designed to promote positive romantic peer relations and prevent interpersonal violence. The Safe Dates program



is an example of such a program for middle and high school students. It has both intra-individual lessons (e.g., ways to recognize and handle anger) and inter-individual lessons (e.g., communication, how to help friends who are being abused). After Safe Dates programming, students reported less perpetration of psychological, moderate physical, and sexual dating violence, as well as less victimization by moderate physical dating violence, compared to those who had not been exposed to Safe Dates. Social-emotional competencies for romantic relationships represent an under-researched aspect of peer relations that requires more attention and intervention evaluation.

Finally, there is a need for more research on social-emotional programming for children with neurodevelopmental difficulties such as autism, learning disabilities, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Evidence is emerging that social skills programs can increase the social capacities of children with these neuro-developmental disorders; however, these children may need different and more intensive social-emotional programming support than is provided in a time-limited intervention.^{59,60}

Social-Emotional Learning is a Societal Responsibility

Promoting social-emotional development is not just a school responsibility. Children and youth need support to develop complex relationship skills in all the places where they live, learn, play, and work. Efforts to promote coordinated, cross-setting supports for social-emotional development can be very effective. For example, the Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PREVNet) was created in Canada through federal research funding (www.prevnet.ca). PREVNet comprises 130 researchers and 62 partner organizations that serve children and youth in families, schools, sports and recreation, social media, and broader social contexts. Through these partnerships, PREVNet has engaged in a societal intervention by co-creating tools and resources to enhance the practices of all those involved in the lives of children and youth across the country.⁴⁰ Over a decade of collective work, the proportion of students who reported bullying others decreased by 62% and the proportion of students who reported both bullying others and being victimized has dropped by 44%. There is still work to be done, however, because the proportion of students who report being victimized increased by 16%.⁴⁰

Conclusions and Implications

The development of early social-emotional capacities such as emotional and behavioral control, empathy, problem solving, and prosocial behavior lay the foundation for healthy relationships and the prevention of adverse outcomes, such as crime, poor health and strained relationships, that are costly for both individuals and society.⁶¹ Basic and applied research point increasingly to the need to not only promote the development of critical social-emotional capacities, but also attend to and create positive peer processes to ensure that every child is able to engage in and benefit from healthy relationships at home, school, peer group, and community.

Although there is a growing recognition of the importance of positive social-emotional development, there is less understanding of the impact of negative peer influences on short- and long-term wellbeing. For example, in young adulthood, the effects of having been frequently bullied by peers can be equivalent to or worse than having been maltreated within the family.⁶² Learning how to get along with and enjoy others is a capacity needed throughout the lifespan and it is much more complex than learning how to learn to read or work with numbers – skills that are intensively supported in the early school years.

Attention to social-emotional learning in schools is on the rise; however, there is a pressing need for schools to be attuned to peer dynamics and enhance the harmony of peer relationships, especially for those students who are struggling to become accepted and liked by peers. Without support, these youths will drift to the margins, become isolated, and miss critical opportunities to develop social-emotional capacities and healthy relationships across the lifespan. Although conceptual models and research suggest that the strongest intervention approach will include a “binocular” focus on individual child SEL and peer group receptivity, there is a need for more research on multi-level, multi-focus approaches that demonstrate their impact not only on individual children, but on their peers, parents, and teachers. It is only with strong policies that direct attention and funding to social-emotional programming and ongoing research, with attention to the role of peers in promoting social-emotional development, that we can ensure that every child and youth has the competencies to meet the social challenges and reap the social benefits within families, workplaces, and communities.

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