

Teaching self-control skills to children reduces classroom problems

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Children taught skills to monitor and control their anger and other emotions improved their classroom behavior and had significantly fewer school disciplinary referrals and suspensions, according to a study by University of Rochester Medical Center researchers.

Children in a school-based mentoring program were about half as likely to have any discipline incident over the three-month period of the study, according to an article published online by the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*. They also had a 43 percent decrease in mean suspensions as compared to the control group, which did not receive mentoring of the self-control skills. In the four-month interval after the intervention began, 1.8 percent of [children](#) in the mentored group were suspended compared to 6.1 percent of the control group. Children taught the new skills also had a 46 percent decrease in mean office disciplinary referrals as compared to the children in the study's control group

"It is exciting that adult mentors, who are not mental health professionals, taught children a set of skills that significantly strengthened the children's ability to function well in their classrooms and meet school expectations," said Peter Wyman, Ph.D., lead author of the article and associate professor of Psychiatry at the Medical Center. "This study suggests that with appropriate guidance from a trained adult, young children are capable of learning a great deal about their emotions and skills for handling their emotions effectively and those skills can have direct, positive benefits for their functioning in school."

The study evaluated the effectiveness of the Rochester Resilience Project that was developed by Wyman and Wendi Cross, Ph.D., associate professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at the Medical Center, to address the needs of young children with emerging behavioral and social-emotional problems by providing an accessible school-based intervention. In a relationship with an intervention mentor over four months, children learn and practice behavioral and cognitive skills designed to strengthen their self-regulation of emotions and address specific goals to improve school adaptation.

"Our goal in developing the Rochester Resilience Project was to 'translate' findings from research about how children learn skills to be more resilient in relationships with adults into an accessible program in schools," Wyman said. "Being a successful student in elementary school classrooms establishes a foundation that makes healthy development more likely in the future."

Activities establish the Resilience Project mentor as an empathic adult informed about each child's life context, strengths and challenges. Through adult-led interactive learning and practice in natural settings, children are taught to monitor their own emotions and the emotion of others, using cues to identify feelings and intensities of feelings. Mentors introduce 'feelings check-in' as a standard practice that serves as a teaching tool about feelings and a transition to skills focused on managing feelings.

Self-control and reducing escalation of emotions is taught through the concept of a "feelings thermometer" to depict intensity. Children learn to use "mental muscles" as a tool to monitor feelings and to stop feelings from entering a hot zone. They also learn to maintain control and regain equilibrium through strategies such as taking a deep-breath, stepping back from emotionally intense situations, and using an imaginary umbrella as protection from hurtful words.

For each of the 14 weekly lessons, children met individually with their mentors for approximately 25 minutes in a private setting during the school day. The skills taught to children are labeled in simple terms suited to developmental level. Reinforcement and feedback from mentors in settings in which children use new skills is also critical for children to successfully acquire the skills. Mentors collaborated with teachers to identify classroom situations in which the mentors could provide reminders to children to use new skills, and cues were provided, a sticker or button, for example, for the child to take as a reminder.

In the study, 226 children from kindergarten up to third grade in two urban elementary schools took part. They had manifested emerging behavioral, social-emotional, and/or on-task learning problems at school. This population was selected due to evidence that those problems increase the likelihood that children will be less successful at school and may develop behavioral problems, such as substance abuse.

Children who received the intervention showed improved functioning in all domains of classroom behavior rated by teachers. The intervention had a positive impact on children's classroom behaviors and rates of disciplinary incidents, including fewer aggressive or disruptive problems, improved on-task learning behaviors and peer social skills, and less shy-withdrawn and more assertive behaviors, the researchers concluded. After the study was completed, children in the control group also were mentored and taught the self-control skills.

The mentoring improved peer social skills for girls but not for boys.

"We found that girls benefited more than boys in terms of improved peer social skills, and the reasons are unknown," the researchers state.

"We note that all mentors were female. It is possible that congruence of child-mentor pairs on sex and other characteristics may influence the extent to which children perceive mentors as valid models for assisting

them with social skills."

This study demonstrates the potential for the Rochester Resilience Project model to reach large numbers of low-income minority children who have limited access to mental health services, the researchers concluded.

"We are continuing to evaluate the Rochester Resilience Project, including studying how enduring its effects are and experiences that help children to maintain the benefits," Wyman said. "My colleagues and I applaud the Rochester City School District administration and school staff who worked closely with us to try out this program and carefully test its impact."

Provided by University of Rochester

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