

Social emotional learning interventions show promise, warrant further study

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Researcher Megan McClelland from Oregon State University. Credit: Oregon State University

Developing a child's social and emotional learning skills in early childhood is seen as a key to the child's success in school, but

researchers are still working to understand which interventions most effectively boost those skills.

Providing training for [early childhood education](#) teachers, embedding direct instruction and practice of targeted skills into daily practice and engaging families in these efforts help to boost the success of these kinds of interventions, Oregon State University researchers suggest in a new paper.

"We know these skills are essential for [children](#), but there's still a lot we don't know about ways to enhance them," said Megan McClelland, the Katherine E. Smith Healthy Children and Families Professor in Human Development and Family Sciences in OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences. "The results to date have been mixed."

"We don't yet know what the 'key ingredients' are here, " added McClelland, the paper's lead author, "but we do have enough evidence to know we need to keep doing this work."

The paper was published today in a special issue of the journal *Future of Children* that is focused on social and emotional learning. McClelland is a nationally recognized expert in child development. Co-authors of the paper are Shauna Tominey, an assistant professor of practice at OSU, Sara Schmitt of Purdue University and Robert Duncan of University of California, Irvine.

Much of McClelland's research focuses on the important role of self-regulation skills - the social and emotional skills that help children pay attention, follow directions, stay on task, form healthy friendships and persist through difficulty.

She has developed and tested social and emotional learning interventions focused on games such as "Red Light, Purple Light," which is similar to

"Red Light, Green Light." A teacher uses construction-paper circles to represent stop and go. Children follow color cues, such as purple represents stop, orange signals go; then switch to the opposite, where purple means go and orange means stop.

Additional rules are added later to increase the complexity of the game. The game requires children to listen and remember instructions, pay attention to the adult leading the game and resist natural inclinations to stop or go.

In the new paper, McClelland and her co-authors reviewed the theory and science behind a number of social emotional learning interventions in [early childhood](#) and found that while several such interventions hold promise, more research is needed to understand variations in results among different groups of children, including why some children appear to benefit more than others and whether the programs are cost effective.

There's also a general lack of long-term studies that might give researchers a clearer picture of the programs' effectiveness, McClelland said. Longer-term studies would also help explain "sleeper" effects, where short-term effects are small or not significant, but long-term effects, such as predictors of high school or college completion, are significant and substantive.

"I look at the long term: Did the child complete college? Were they able to stay out of the criminal justice system?" McClelland said. "Those are some of the most important indicators of the social emotional learning."

Overall, studies in the field indicate that children from low-income families tend to show the most gains from social [emotional learning](#) interventions, but results for other groups of students are more mixed, although a number of studies show positive effects.

The review also showed that the most successful interventions tend to be low cost, easily implemented, are fun for kids, including training for teachers, and can be built in to classroom lessons on literacy and math, McClelland said.

"The bottom line here is that there's a lot of subtlety to the findings of this work so far," she said. "Fortunately, we do have some ideas about what's working, and we have some ideas about where we need to go next in the field."

Provided by Oregon State University

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