

# Students do better in school when they can understand, manage emotions

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Students who are better able to understand and manage their emotions effectively, a skill known as emotional intelligence, do better at school than their less skilled peers, as measured by grades and standardized test scores, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Although we know that high [intelligence](#) and a conscientious personality are the most important psychological traits necessary for academic success, our research highlights a third factor, [emotional intelligence](#), that may also help students succeed," said Carolyn MacCann, Ph.D., of the University of Sydney and lead author of the study. "It's not enough to be smart and hardworking. Students must also be able to understand and manage their emotions to succeed at [school](#)."

The research was published in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

The concept of emotional intelligence as an area of academic research is relatively new, dating to the 1990s, according to MacCann. Although there is evidence that social and emotional learning programs in schools are effective at improving [academic performance](#), she believes this may be the first comprehensive meta-analysis on whether higher emotional intelligence relates to academic success.

MacCann and her colleagues analyzed data from more than 160 studies, representing more than 42,000 students from 27 countries, published between 1998 and 2019. More than 76% were from English-speaking countries. The students ranged in age from elementary school to college. The researchers found that students with higher emotional intelligence tended to get higher grades and better achievement test scores than those with lower emotional intelligence scores. This finding held true even when controlling for intelligence and personality factors.

What was most surprising to the researchers was the association held regardless of age.

As for why emotional intelligence can affect academic performance, MacCann believes a number of factors may come into play.

"Students with higher emotional intelligence may be better able to

manage [negative emotions](#), such as anxiety, boredom and disappointment, that can negatively affect academic performance," she said. "Also, these students may be better able to manage the social world around them, forming better relationships with teachers, peers and family, all of which are important to [academic success](#)."

Finally, the skills required for emotional intelligence, such as understanding human motivation and emotion, may overlap with the skills required to master certain subjects, such as history and language, giving students an advantage in those subject areas, according MacCann.

As an example, MacCann described the school day of a hypothetical [student](#) named Kelly, who is good at math and science but low in emotional intelligence.

"She has difficulty seeing when others are irritated, worried or sad. She does not know how people's emotions may cause future behavior. She does not know what to do to regulate her own feelings," said MacCann.

As a result, Kelly does not recognize when her best friend, Lucia, is having a bad day, making Lucia mad at her for her insensitivity. Lucia then does not help Kelly (as she usually does) later in English literature class, a class she often struggles in because it requires her to analyze and understand the motivations and emotions of characters in books and plays.

"Kelly feels ashamed that she can't do the work in English literature that other students seem to find easy. She is also upset that Lucia is mad at her. She can't seem to shake these feelings, and she is not able to concentrate on her math problems in the next class," said MacCann.

"Because of her low emotion management ability, Kelly cannot bounce back from her negative emotions and finds herself struggling even in subjects she is good at."

MacCann cautions against widespread testing of students to identify and target those with low emotional intelligence as it may stigmatize those students. Instead, she recommends interventions that involve the whole school, including additional teacher training and a focus on teacher well-being and emotional skills.

"Programs that integrate emotional skill development into the existing curriculum would be beneficial, as research suggests that training works better when run by teachers rather than external specialists," she said. "Increasing skills for everyone—not just those with low [emotional intelligence](#)—would benefit everyone."

**More information:** "Emotional Intelligence Predicts Academic Performance: A Meta-Analysis," by Carolyn MacCann, PhD, Yixin Jiang, PhD, Luke Brown, MSc, and Micaela Bucich, BPsych, The University of Sydney; Kit Double, PhD, Oxford University, and Amirali Minbashian, PhD, University of New South Wales Sydney. *Psychological Bulletin*, published online Dec. 12, 2019.

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