

# Social and emotional learning produces significant benefits for students

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In the midst of an unprecedented mental health crisis plaguing our nation's youth, a study led by Christina Cipriano, Ph.D., assistant

professor in Yale Child Study Center, and Michael Strambler, associate professor of psychiatry, substantiates the evidence of social and emotional learning (SEL) in supporting student flourishing in school and life.

In the new registered report, now published in *Child Development*, an interdisciplinary team of 10 researchers systematically analyzed 424 experimental studies of SEL, reflecting more than 50 countries and more than 250 discrete SEL programs from the past decade. The most comprehensive and inclusive review to date, their analyses of more than half a million kindergarten to 12th-grade students worldwide reinforced pre-existing knowledge about SEL, expanded understanding of the impacts of SEL, and illuminated the path forward for the field of SEL.

## **Reinforcing what we know about SEL**

Building on decades of research that demonstrated positive results of SEL, this study confirmed that students who participated in SEL programs do better in school, academically and socially. Students demonstrated increased [academic achievement](#) and school functioning including improved attendance and engagement in learning. Students also showed improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors, such as student self-efficacy, self-esteem, mindset, perseverance, and optimism, among others.

Furthermore, the report confirmed that students who participate in SEL programs also feel better in school, reporting less anxiety, stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Students were also more connected and included and had better relationships with peers and teachers.

"Our new findings provide robust evidence and a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of SEL: positive effects that matter for [student success](#) in the short and long term, across the K-12 academic lifespan,

and across a range of SEL programs and outcomes," says Christina Cipriano, Ph.D.

Cipriano and her team also found that the positive effects of SEL programs on student social and emotional skills continue six months or more after a program ends, as well as confirmed that specific features of SEL programs: high-quality, sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (also referred to as SAFE) programs delivered by teachers have the strongest positive effects on students.

## **New findings on SEL**

This [meta-analysis](#) was the first of its kind to systematically examine several previously unexamined domains of SEL, resulting in new findings that will influence future research, practice, and policy specific to school safety and civic behaviors. Regarding safety and experiences of school climate, nationwide conversations around how to support students to feel and be safe to learn in school are a top priority. Importantly, beyond all outcomes examined, this comprehensive review reported the largest effect of SEL programs was on students' increased perceptions of safety and inclusion at school.

Regarding civics, this study is believed to be the first to systematically tease apart the statistically significant distinctions between prosocial behaviors, such as being a good friend; and civic behaviors and attitudes, such as understanding civic processes and systems, [social justice](#), understanding of current events, and moral or ethical reasoning. SEL programs demonstrated positive effects in both of these domains. Given the dynamic interaction between healthy climates, behaviors, and student academic, personal, and [social development](#), results encourage SEL implementation to support healthier and safer school experiences for students K-12. These findings just scratch the surface of new evidence for SEL now available in the registered report.

## Where SEL goes from here

To provide the best possible education for students, it is essential to understand SEL's role in promoting educational equity. This new study addresses this complex issue with comprehensive data that suggests the field can do more to embrace the differences in SEL programming and [student](#) experiences therewith to support all students to access and benefit from SEL.

The researchers urge the broader SEL community to focus on expanding the types of data collected and reported in the studies of SEL effects to support meaningful and precise measurement, evaluation, and interpretations.

"Through this work, we recognize that providing the best education for all students, while achieving a vision of SEL that supports everyone, hinges on the rigorous evaluation of SEL programs and outcomes as they evolve within our nation's [school](#) communities," says Cipriano. As the nation tends to the growing child mental health crisis, this research reinforces how social and emotional learning positively impacts the overall well-being of children and youth.

**More information:** Christina Cipriano et al, The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions, *Child Development* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13968](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13968)

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