

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Reviewing evidence for school-based programs to support social and emotional learning: A guide for preschool and school leaders

Background

It is well established that social and emotional skills are essential for children's capacity to learn and succeed at school. Building social and emotional skills and competencies helps students to develop a range of self-regulation skills and coping strategies that can be drawn on to calm themselves down, focus their attention and regulate their behaviour, which in turn help to reduce emotional distress, reduce disruptive behaviour in the classroom and improve overall learning and academic outcomes.

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on measuring social and emotional skills, in an effort to better monitor population trends and to evaluate the impact of interventions that seek to support these skills. School leaders in South Australia can access reports on the social and emotional skills of reception students collected through the Australian Early Development Census, and social and emotional skills of children in Grades 4 to 9 through the Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (see break out box).

While having data on the social and emotional skills of students is an essential first step, the question of how best to respond to these results is not a straightforward one. There are a large range of programs on the market and choosing between them is not easy. Study findings are often presented in highly technical language, most make claims of impact, and studies use differing measures of success. At times, interpreting these differences can require a degree in advanced statistical methodologies. This can make it difficult for preschool and school leaders to establish which programs are likely to be the most impactful and most appropriate for their aims within their local context.

Aim

This research brief provides guidance to help leaders review the evidence for pre-school and school programs designed to support social and emotional learning (SEL). A full report with more detailed information about these guidelines, as well



Where can I access information about the social and emotional competencies of children in my preschool, school or community?

Reception students

Available from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) team

- Visit: www.aedc.gov.au
- Email: Education.AEDCTeam@sa.gov.au

Grade 4-9 students

Available from the Wellbeing and Engagement and Collection (WEC) team

- Visit: www.education.sa.gov.au/wellbeing-and-engagement-census
- Email: education.wec@sa.gov.au

as a review of a series of universal, evidence-based pre-school and school-based SEL programs available in Australia, can be found [here](#). With new programs developed every year, any review of programs is likely to quickly become outdated. Thus, this guide supports school leaders to assess the quality of evidence for programs they are considering implementing in their sites.

Assessing the potential value of a program

Programs are typically promoted as being evidence-based and it can be difficult for schools to choose between the vast array of programs on offer. When considering implementing a program for a particular issue, considering the strength of evidence for each program and the fit to the school community, can help schools align claims against their needs. Programs that are effective should be both acceptable to the population the school serves and also demonstrate an impact on skills and capacities that support children in their schooling. In critically appraising evidence for SEL programs, leaders might ask themselves:

a. Evidence of impact

Did children in the study improve because of the program or did they mature over time?

To help answer this question, the study needs to have a comparison group of children from a different class or school who did not receive the program, so that the changes over time in social and emotional skills can be compared for children who did and did not receive the program. Two examples of good quality study designs that utilise a comparison group are described below.

i. Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) involve the random allocation of students into control and study groups. Doing so eliminates the influence of other factors that would influence the outcome, so that the effectiveness of the intervention can be isolated. RCTs are considered to be the “gold standard” of impact evaluations, and provide the strongest evidence of program effectiveness, but are not always practical to implement in certain contexts.

ii. Quasi-experimental (QE) studies are the next-best form of experimental study. They can be used when an intervention and comparison group are available but randomisation into these two groups is not possible. These studies provide compelling evidence, but results are

generally viewed as less strong than those from RCTs.

b. Fit for purpose

Does this intervention target the things that students in my school need?

When reviewing evidence of impact, it is important to consider the types of outcomes the program has been shown to impact and how well these align with the key issues that you have identified in your school. For example, if you are primarily concerned about children’s capacity to regulate their emotions, then it would be important to know that the program you are considering has been shown to build emotional regulation. Typically, different studies focus on measuring different outcomes, and as such school leaders need to assess which are the most relevant for their aims in selecting a program for their school.

c. Appropriate for our students

Has the program been tested in a group of children who have similar values, cultural experiences, and environments to those of the children in my school?

In assessing how relevant the findings of the study are to the context of Australian preschools and schools, it is also important to review the characteristics of the sample who participated in the research study. For example, if you are seeking a program to implement in your school, evidence of effectiveness in a low socioeconomic context in the U.S will likely be less relevant than the evidence provided in a trial conducted in Australia.

Where can I go to find the evidence?

The growing interest in supporting students’ social and emotional wellbeing has led to an explosion of new programs on the market. In order to make informed decisions about which programs to implement, school leaders need to know where to find evidence-based SEL programs on the market.

Two key resources that provide free, up-to-date information about SEL programs are:

1. [National Education “Be You” Initiative Programs Directory](#)
2. [CASEL Program Guides](#).

For further details

To access the full report see: Gregory, T., Herreen, D., & Brinkman, S. (2018). Review of the quality of evidence for preschool and school-based programs to support social and emotional skills, perseverance and academic self-concept. [Available here](#).

ABOUT THE FRASER MUSTARD CENTRE

Working together to improve the development, education, health and wellbeing of young Australians, the

Telethon Kids Institute and the *South Australian Department for Education* have joined forces in a unique approach to research translation. The Fraser Mustard Centre collaboration aims to:

- Improve and promote the health and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia through the unique application of multidisciplinary research
- Help shift focus from the historical delineation between health and education services to an integrated approach with a focus on child development
- Build capacity amongst public sector staff and academic researchers to design, undertake and use research to improve the environments in which children live and the service systems which support families
- Attract funding for shared priorities for research that leads to improved developmental, education, health, and wellbeing outcomes for

