



EARLY  
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# SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: SKILLS FOR LIFE AND WORK



Cabinet Office



Social Mobility &  
Child Poverty  
Commission

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The paper provides an overview summary of the findings from three strands of work undertaken by independent researchers. I am grateful to the authors of these reports who have committed great talent and pace to the work. This summary is intended to capture the purpose and key findings. I particularly hope people will read the reports themselves and find them useful.

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Ultimately any errors and omissions are the responsibility of the authors and of me as editor.

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# 1. Introduction

*“You can get all ‘A’s and still flunk life.”*

—Walker Percy

This review has been jointly commissioned by the [Early Intervention Foundation](#), the [Cabinet Office](#) and the [Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission](#).

Three independent reports have been published that seek to answer a range of pressing questions:

- 1. UCL Institute of Education: Social and emotional skills in childhood and their long-term effects on adult life.** Does the evidence suggest that social and emotional skills developed in childhood matter for adult life? How much? Which characteristics are important, for which outcomes?
- 2. National University of Ireland, Galway: What works in enhancing social and emotional skills development during childhood and adolescence?** What is the evidence on the effectiveness of social and emotional skills-based interventions implemented in the school and out-of-school setting in the UK? What are their key characteristics?
- 3. ResearchAbility: A deep dive into social and emotional learning. What do the views of those involved tell us about the challenges for policy-makers?** How are the issues surrounding implementation of social and emotional learning on the ground seen in the world of policy and practice? What is the nature of current provision and what are the barriers and enablers to improving provision?

This review, comprising the three reports above, bolsters the evidence on the strong links between social and emotional skills in children and how they fare as adults. We find that there are many programmes across the UK that have set out to improve social and emotional skills; we also find that some of them have rigorous evidence to prove their effectiveness, and that many do not. We describe what practitioners, policy makers and participants in social and emotional learning think about how the learning is delivered, monitored and evaluated, and what still needs to be done.

## 1.1 Why we have commissioned the work

**The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF)** aims to shift support for children and families from late intervention – picking up the pieces once problems are entrenched – to early intervention. An important recent [report](#) from the EIF has shown that local and national government in England and Wales is spending annually nearly £17 billion on picking up the pieces from damaging social issues affecting young people, such as child abuse and neglect, unemployment and youth crime. This £17 billion is spent only on the short-run direct fiscal cost of acute, statutory and essential services and benefits that are required when children and young people experience severe difficulties in life, such as child abuse and neglect, unemployment and youth crime. It does not capture the longer-term impact or the

wider social and economic costs. There are also inter-generational consequences of these outcomes and of the issues that underpin them. This means that the £17 billion is only a small part of the costs of failure to achieve successful transitions to adulthood.

Early intervention, by contrast, is about taking action as soon as possible to tackle the root causes of social problems, ensuring that everyone is able to realise their full potential by developing the range of skills we all need to thrive.

The EIF was set up to help local areas, the voluntary and community sector and others in addressing the causes of the difficulties that some young people face as soon as they emerge rather than wait and intervene later, at a heavier price. [The Allen Review \(2011\)](#) identified social and emotional skills as a critical issue in shaping children and young people's wellbeing. As a What Works Centre our focus is on catalysing the use of evidence to inform policy and practice, with the goal of driving improvements to children's outcomes and breaking inter-generational patterns of disadvantage.

Since 2013 the **Cabinet Office** has led on youth policy in Government with a particular focus on social action, youth voice, skills for life and work, and building an evidence base. It is already working to add to the evidence base through its Randomised Control Trials as part of the Youth Social Action Fund, and through its support of the [Centre for Youth Impact](#). It has also co-funded this review, and been closely involved in the work on strand two around out of school youth settings, in order to understand the degree to which these programmes that aim to enhance skills for life and work are supported by evidence of effectiveness, and how this can be improved.

The **Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission** reports on progress towards reducing child poverty and increasing opportunities. The Commission shares the concern of the EIF that a young person's background should not determine their life chances. They are interested in research on the importance of social and emotional skills in gaining access to high-status, well-paid jobs, an important aspect of social mobility, as well as in the general importance of social and emotional skills.

## 1.2 What do we mean by Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

There is considerable interest in skills other than literacy and numeracy, or the cognitive and academic skills that are directly tested in Key Stage assessments and most school qualifications. It is known that we are not born with a fixed social and emotional skill set, but that we can learn and improve our social and emotional skills throughout childhood and beyond. These skills are sometimes captured by terms such as non-cognitive skills, character and grit. There is lots of debate about how to define, measure and prioritise them. We use the term 'learning' to emphasise that our core concern is with the development of these skills rather than with static capability. We have not attempted to create a universal framework for these skills, but rather to recognise the diversity of features that are important. We drew on the existing literature to identify five key aspects of social and emotional capability:

- Self-perceptions, self-awareness and self-direction (including self-esteem and the belief that one's own actions can make a difference);
- Motivation;
- Self-control/self-regulation (generally characterised as greater impulse control and fewer behavioural problems);
- Social skills, including relationship skills and communication skills;
- Resilience and coping.

We use 'social and emotional skills' as an umbrella term to capture these five dimensions.

This review has collected evidence to better understand these skills and characteristics, why they matter, and what government and those who work with young people can do to enhance them.

## 2 What have we found?

### 2.1 Report 1. Social and emotional skills in childhood and their long-term effects on adult life.

A team at the UCL Institute of Education looked at what the evidence says about whether social and emotional skills measured in childhood are associated with adult outcomes. Previous studies were reviewed, and a new analysis was carried out based on a large British study of people born in 1970 and followed into their forties.

#### What role do childhood social and emotional skills play in adult life?

Using the framework for social and emotional learning outlined above, the key findings of the literature review component of the report indicate that:

- Of all of the five social and emotional skills groups considered, **self-control** and **self-regulation** matters most consistently for adult outcomes.

For example, better self-regulation is strongly associated with mental well-being; good physical health and health behaviours; and socio-economic and labour market outcomes.

- **Self-perceptions** and **self-awareness**, such as self-esteem and the belief that one's own actions can make a difference are also found to be important for many adult outcomes.

For example, self-esteem and the belief that one's own actions can make a difference matter for mental well-being; good physical health and health behaviours; and socio-economic and labour market outcomes.

- **Social** skills, related to peer relationships, sociability and social functioning in childhood, also matter.

For example, social skills are important for mental well-being and having a family.

- In general there is a relative lack of evidence on the long-term importance of **motivation** and **resilience**. Whether this means these skills are unimportant for adult outcomes, or that these skills are just under-researched, is unclear.
- The evidence also suggests the importance of **emotional well-being** in childhood. Emotional health in childhood matters for mental well-being as an adult.

New analysis in the report of data from the 1970 Cohort Study finds that social and emotional and cognitive skills are each very important for future life. Their development is related. Children with strong cognitive skills typically show stronger social and emotional development, and vice-versa. However, social and emotional measures provide important signals about likely outcomes above and beyond what is picked up by measures of literacy and numeracy. Compared with cognitive ability assessed at the same age (10 years), social and emotional skills:

- **matter more** for general mental well-being (such as greater life satisfaction, mental health and well-being);
- **matter similarly** for health and health related outcomes (such as lower likelihood of obesity, smoking and drinking, and better self-rated health);
- **matter similarly** for some socio-economic and labour market outcomes (such as higher income and wealth, being employed, and not being in social housing);
- **matter less** for other socio-economic and labour market outcomes such as obtaining a degree, having higher wages and being employed in a top job (although there is nonetheless a relationship to these outcomes).

While the precise causal pathways through which these skills are related to adult outcomes cannot be identified by this research, we also know these skills matter from established theories of human development. Overall, this provides repeated and consistent evidence that childhood social and emotional skills matter for the things people care about in life, independently of other factors and circumstances.

### What does the research tell us about the role of social and emotional skills in social mobility?

It is well known that children whose parents have a 'top job' are considerably more likely to be in a top job themselves as an adult. This study shows that social and emotional skills at age 10 (in particular, conscientiousness and believing that one's actions can make a difference) do play a discernible role in transmitting access to top jobs between generations. Differences in these skills accounted for almost 10% of the higher likelihood of being in a top job enjoyed by children with parents from professional backgrounds. Importantly, this effect is on top of the role played by cognitive ability, which accounted for roughly 20% of increased likelihood.

Social and emotional skills transmit top job advantage predominantly (but not exclusively) through their influence on educational attainment, particularly at age 16. This suggests that interventions to improve these skills are likely to improve access to a competitive top job if they can help children to achieve better qualifications in school.

## What should we conclude?

The evidence gathered makes it clear that social and emotional skills matter for the things people care about in life, including adult mental health and life satisfaction, socio-economic, labour market, health and health-related outcomes. The findings provide a robust case for increased local and national commitment to supporting the social and emotional development of children and young people.

Worryingly, the report also finds inequalities in these skills between children growing up in different backgrounds. Analysis of a contemporary cohort of children shows that those from poorer households tend to exhibit, on average, worse self-control (conduct) and emotional health than their wealthier peers and, strikingly, that these average differences are evident by the age of 3 years old. This highlights a potential role for targeted early intervention to improve social and emotional skills even before children start school.

## 2.2 Report 2. What works in enhancing social and emotional skills development during childhood and adolescence? A review of the evidence on the effectiveness of school-based and out-of-school programmes in the UK.

In the second strand of work an international team of experts based at the National University of Ireland Galway undertook a review to determine the current evidence on the effectiveness of programmes available in the UK that aim to enhance the social and emotional skills development of children and young people aged 4-20 years. Programmes in **school** and **out-of-school settings** were included.

A total of 39 school-based interventions were found that are implemented in the UK with a rigorous UK evaluation and/or an international evidence-base. The scope for out-of-school interventions was broader, allowing for less rigorous evaluations; 55 such interventions fulfilled the criteria. The school-based programmes are designed to increase students' social and emotional skills through increasing their repertoire of coping, emotional understanding and interpersonal problem-solving skills and enhancing their self-esteem, self-control and sense of efficacy or confidence in their own ability. Out-of-school interventions use a diversity of methods to develop young people's social and emotional skills including arts and sport, family skills training, mentoring, social action projects, cultural awareness, engagement in further education/training and developing social and emotional skills in combination with crime and substance misuse prevention.

The report provides detailed analysis of the strength of evidence on the effectiveness of these programmes. The review found strong and consistent support for the impact of social and emotional skills programmes implemented in the school setting. Well-evaluated programmes in primary and secondary schools which sought to improve the skills of all students, including self-esteem, social skills, problem solving and coping skills, led to benefits for students' social and emotional competencies and educational outcomes. More targeted programmes for students at higher risk of developing problems were also found to be effective, as were

examples of programmes focused on the prevention of violence and substance misuse through the development of social and emotional skills. Programmes that adopted a whole school approach, i.e. involving staff, parents and the wider community as well as what was taught in the classroom, were found to be effective especially in relation to preventing bullying in schools.

The evidence for programmes delivered in out-of-school youth settings is less definitive. There is evidence from international reviews that these programmes can benefit young people's social and emotional development. There is also some promising evidence from programmes developed in the UK of the benefits of these programmes for youth including those who are at risk or socially excluded. However the evidence currently available on the programmes in the UK is, on the whole, not yet of sufficient quality to demonstrate impact. The effectiveness of newly developed programmes needs to be evaluated rigorously before they are rolled out more widely.

There are a number of evaluations underway which will begin to address the gap in evidence in the coming years, and that have been published since this review was completed. For example, a [report](#) by the Behavioural Insights Team, funded by the Cabinet Office, published results of Randomised Control Trials on youth social action and the development of skills important for employment and adulthood. The findings are encouraging and show a link between social action and an increase in skills such as empathy and community involvement.

The best evidenced programmes in schools and out-of-school settings have adopted a structured approach to delivery, including: having specific and well-defined goals; direct and explicit focus on desired outcomes; provision of structured activities; training of facilitators and use of a structured manual; and implementation over longer period of time.

This independent review led by the National University of Ireland Galway provides the foundation for that further work. It shows that there are many well-evidenced programmes in school settings in the UK and internationally that could be scaled up and integrated into the school curriculum. It identifies youth sector programmes that are promising and highlights the need for more comprehensive evaluations in order to support and enable best practice. Between now and the autumn the EIF will look at all the programmes in this report more closely as well as gather further information from programme providers. This will enable us to make specific recommendations about which programmes work, which don't and what these programmes cost.

## 2.3 Report 3. A deep dive into social and emotional learning. What do the views of those involved tell us about the challenges for policy-makers?

This third report was a qualitative review into social and emotional skills provision for children and young people in the education and youth sectors, carried out by the independent research consultancy ResearchAbility. The report describes the views of

participants from interviews conducted at three levels: the national strategic level, the local strategic level and in settings where provision takes place. Interviews in settings were with both staff as well as children and young people. The research sought to describe the key issues affecting provision in both the education and youth sector, and to identify the factors that facilitate and challenge delivery. Eight key challenges for policy and practice were identified:

1. Social and emotional skills were described as being a group, defined in different ways, but seen to be interdependent and interlinked. Effective provision (resulting in 'well-rounded' people) was reported as needing to deliver the whole group of skills, not just a focus on one or two characteristics.
2. Currently, social and emotional learning provision is hugely variable in the youth and education sectors, meaning that some children and young people receive it and some do not. It was seen as provision that should be available to all, particularly given that children and young people in disadvantaged situations were reported to gain more from social and emotional learning provision than those with opportunities to develop social and emotional skills at home.
3. Evaluating the impact of social and emotional learning is important and challenging. At the moment, this is not being done systematically or widely. Therefore, children and young people are not necessarily receiving the best provision possible. Improving this evidence base in a way that addresses the challenges in measurement was seen as important.
4. The skills and training of staff supporting social and emotional learning with children and young people was described as key in order to ensure quality provision. This was both in terms of specific curriculum delivery in education, such as PSHE, as well as the skill set required for working with young people, such as build trusting relationships in the youth sector. New teachers were described as sometimes underprepared in this area which led to suggestions to include child psychology and social and emotional learning in both initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD).
5. Recognising the achievements children and young people make in social and emotional learning was described as being really important. The process of reflecting on their progress was described as helping to develop social and emotional learning. A nationally recognised award or certificate would be of tangible benefit to young people in their onward journeys into further education or employment.
6. In the education sector, having a 'whole school approach' to social and emotional skills (SES) delivery was described as the most effective approach alongside dedicated curriculum provision, such as PSHE. Such an approach required strong leadership and for SES to be embedded, modelled and reinforced throughout the school.
7. The key operational drivers in the education sector were reported to be attainment targets and the Ofsted accountability framework, which were not felt to support prioritisation of social and emotional learning or consistency in

its provision. The voice of children and young people in contributing to the role of social and emotional learning in education was noted to be absent. Policy leadership was seen as necessary if social and emotional learning is to be prioritised.

8. The youth sector was reported to be fast changing. In Local Authority provision emphasis had shifted from open access to targeted provision. This was described as likely to impact on children and young people currently just under the threshold of targeted intervention. Provision in the third sector was seen as growing, especially around social action.

### 3 So what? Implications for policy and practice.

These three reports make clear that social and emotional skills play a fundamental role in shaping life chances of children and young people and the nature of their adult lives. They are important both for individuals, for society and in influencing intergenerational patterns of inequality and disadvantage.

It is also clear that there are many things that schools can do that have an effect on these capabilities. There are programmes that have been shown in replicated, quality evaluations to have an impact on social and emotional skills. But as Report 3 makes clear the current nature of provision in our schools is wide-ranging and variable. There are no indicators of performance in broad use and there is no clear framework of assessment. There are big gaps in advice for schools on what works.

In the out-of-school programmes the picture is weaker. There are many innovative programmes across the country often led by the voluntary sector, that are based on sound principles and may well be effective, but for which the current evidence of impact is limited. Given the reduction in funding in this area, the case for building a robust and broad-based pool of evidence is stronger than ever—both to ensure that programmes are of the highest quality and to strengthen the case for investment from a range of sources.

We think this current picture requires more purposive action across the schools and youth sector, with particular focus on building capability in the measurement of impact and the use of this information in decision making at all levels. More specific policy and practice recommendations will follow. This review makes the case for the importance of this work and calls for more urgency.