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Teaching 4-Year-Olds To Feel Better

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You're 4 years old, building a block tower. Another kid runs up and knocks it down. What do you do? A) Tell her that's against the rules. B) Go tell a teacher. C) Hit her. D) Start to cry. E) What did you say again?

According to a large national study just released, it's possible to teach kids in preschool to give better answers to that question — not only when asked by a researcher, but in real life. And these improved social and emotional skills, in turn, can help them spend more time engaged in learning. The study looked at Head Start programs. It's "the first large-scale nationally randomized study of strategies for promoting the social and emotional development of 4-year-olds," as the New America Foundation's EdCentral blog points out. And for the first time, it shows that teaching aimed at social and emotional learning can be effective on a large scale.

Commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the study included 307 classrooms and thousands of students in all regions of the country.

Pamela Morris, a senior research fellow at MRDC, directed the work, which was released July 7 on the first day of Head Start's annual research conference.

"HHS is interested in an evidence base about what would make a difference for Head Start kids," says Morris, who is also a professor of applied psychology and director of the Institute for Human Development and Social Change at New York University.

There's a reason the federal government is focused on this now. As many states and localities move to increase access to preschool, there are widespread calls to ensure that such programs are effective, and a big debate over what "effective" looks like.

While many programs have traditionally focused on academic readiness, a shift has been building toward an emphasis on social and emotional learning. Researchers have identified qualities like delayed gratification, "grit" and "mindset," and they've developed curricula designed to instill those qualities. The idea is that the ability to apply yourself to a task, screen out distractions and believe in the possibility of your own improvement is a bigger determinant of success than reading and math skills.

Meanwhile, other researchers have sought ways of countering the "toxic" effects of poverty on the brain. Low-income students are more likely to experience a personal disruption and trauma. That, they believe, leads to emotional difficulties and actually interferes with their cognitive development.

Finally, researchers looking at the "school-to-prison pipeline" have identified a direct correlation between the amount of trouble kids get into in school, and their likelihood of being involved with the law. And they have identified disparities in how school discipline is applied. The discrepancies start early: Black students, for example, are far more likely to be suspended and even expelled from preschool.

So any methods of teaching in preschool that promise to help kids feel better, get along better and behave better from the start could have far-reaching consequences.

For the study, Morris and her team examined three very different interventions, with different underlying theories of how to improve social and emotional learning. All of them had showed promising early evidence, but on a small scale. They assigned classes randomly to each condition, which is the gold standard for such research. Teachers were essentially agreeing to fundamentally change how they taught for the year. And the teachers got extensive coaching to help them understand and put the programs in place.

The three approaches the study looked at are:

- **The Incredible Years.** Focuses on coaching teachers to build warmer relationships with their students and practice positive discipline. For example, saying, "I like how Johnny has his hands in his lap," vs. yelling, "Everybody sit down NOW!"
- **Preschool PATHS.** Explicitly teaches children about emotions, emotional regulation and social interaction through storytelling, games and lessons at circle time. Say two children are playing together. A teacher might draw attention to them and ask the class: "How do you think Ann felt when Neveah gave her a hug? That's right, she felt happy! How do you look when you feel happy? What makes you feel happy?"
- **Tools of the Mind**, a play-based program that gives students 50-minute blocks of time to plan and act out elaborate make-believe scenarios. This condition proved the hardest to make work, because it was the biggest change from normal classroom practice. It also showed the fewest positive effects.

Both The Incredible Years and Preschool PATHS, however, showed small positive effects on students' emotion knowledge, social problem-solving skills and social behaviors. Among other things, the children in these classrooms could name and talk about their own feelings or those of a character in a picture. When presented with the block tower scenario mentioned above, they gave more "competent" responses like "I would tell a teacher," and fewer "aggressive" or "disorganized" responses like saying they would kick the other kid, or ignoring the question altogether. And their teachers indeed observed that the kids were able to get along better. "I was pleasantly surprised" by the scale and range of impacts, Morris says.

Kayle Richardson helps train the teachers at a Head Start center in Harrisburg, Pa. They were one of the original preschools to develop Preschool PATHS and have been using it for over 20 years. She says, "It's probably the thing that differentiates us the most" from other day care centers. Children often go home and teach their parents how to use the "turtle" technique for calming down, which involves crossing your arms over your chest, taking deep breaths and stating the problem.

Not every area of the study was as promising. The researchers weren't able to directly assess the students once they left for kindergarten, and didn't document many lasting effects there.

This study is likely to be influential to the growing debate over quality preschool. "This is a superbly done study," says Dale Farran, the Antonio and Anita Gotto Chair in Teaching and Learning and a senior associate director of the Peabody Research Institute at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of a previous research study on Tools of the Mind that failed to show any significant impact, even after a full year of teacher training.

Farran points out, however, that the effects in the Head Start study were relatively small and limited, and there wasn't any observable impact on the children's academic skills. "These kids are leaving Head Start one standard deviation below the norm" for all children when it comes to reading and math, she says. "The size of the effects was small. We don't know if they will ever translate into learning, and that's worrisome to me."

Still, one of the most interesting outcomes and a signpost, says Morris, for future research was that teachers in these classrooms saw the children engaged in more learning behaviors. They were better able to focus when singing songs and spent more time reading.

The thinking here, supported by other studies, is that when classes are calmer overall, students have more time to learn. "It's distracting and anxiety-provoking to children when they can't read other kids' emotions," says Morris. "They're constantly worrying: Did that kid bump into me on purpose? Were they being mean? Just like when an adult has something else they're worrying about, it's harder to focus on work."