SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Social-Emotional Learning for Kindergarten–Grade 5

Introduction

Second Step SEL for Kindergarten through Grade 5 is a universal, classroom-based program designed to increase students' school success and decrease problem behaviors by promoting social-emotional competence and self-regulation. It teaches skills that strengthen students' ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. The program targets key risk and protective factors linked to a range of problem behaviors. Equipping students with Second Step skills creates a safer, more respectful learning environment that promotes school success for all.

Social-Emotional Competence and Self-Regulation

Second Step SEL teaches students to have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. Students with these abilities are better able to participate in and benefit from classroom instruction (Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001). They have more positive relationships with teachers and peers, thereby increasing their feelings of school connectedness (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Students who feel connected to school and to their peers are more likely to have positive academic self-concepts (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005) and less likely to be rejected, isolated, and bullied. They are more motivated for academic success and more engaged in learning (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). Socially and emotionally competent students are also protected from health-compromising behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Self-Regulation and School Success

To be successful in school, students must also be able to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (McClelland, Ponitz, Messersmith, & Tominey, 2010; Thompson & Raikes, 2007). This ability to self-regulate facilitates constructive participation in learning activities and successful relations with peers and adults. Self-regulation skills support both academic achievement and the development of social-emotional competencies for elementary students (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003). Students' ability to self-regulate can be influenced by teachers in the classroom. In every lesson from Kindergarten through Grade 3, Second Step SEL includes five-minute games, known as Brain Builders, which work to build students' attention, working memory, and inhibitory control. These skills, sometimes referred to as executive-function skills, are important aspects of self-regulation that can positively influence students' success in school (Blair, 2002; Blair & Razza, 2007). Building attention refers to students' ability to direct, focus, and shift attention while screening out or ignoring distractions (Eisenberg, Guthrie, et al., 2000). Working memory involves students' ability to remember and use information, such as a teacher's directions or the directions for an activity (Baddeley, 2007). Inhibitory control helps students stop automatic but inappropriate responses or actions and remember appropriate behaviors, such as raising a hand before speaking (Eisenberg et al., 2004). Brain Builder games directly challenge and provide practice in these skills, which is integral to realizing the program's overall goal of developing students' self-regulation skills.

Second Step Units

Skills for Learning

Second Step SEL further promotes the development of self-regulation skills and improved participation in learning through its focus on skills for learning. Focusing attention, listening, using self-talk, and being assertive are skills for learning introduced and practiced in a separate unit in Kindergarten through Grade 3 and integrated into the Grades 4 and 5 lessons across all units. Students must be able to integrate and apply these skills in order to be successful in diverse learning environments (Duncan et al., 2007; Howse, Lange, Farran, & Boyles, 2003; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). The skills for learning play a role in the development of social-emotional competence and are therefore woven into the program's other units as well.

Empathy

Second Step SEL helps students develop the ability to have empathy for others. This ability provides the foundation for helpful and socially responsible behavior and the development of skills for coping with peer challenges. Empathy is an important aspect of social-emotional competence and is related to academic success (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Students with high levels of empathy are skilled at identifying emotions in themselves and others, labeling these emotions, and considering situations from others' perspectives (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010). These students also tend to be less aggressive, better liked, and more socially skilled, and to have higher academic achievement than students with lower levels of empathy (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Izard et al., 2001). Being able to feel or understand what another person is feeling—the Second Step definition of empathy—prepares students to manage their own strong emotions and solve interpersonal problems.

Emotion Management

Teaching students to recognize strong emotions and use strategies to calm down has been shown to be effective in increasing their ability to cope and decreasing the likelihood of aggressive or other problem behaviors (McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, Mennin, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011). Effective emotion management is related to decreased levels of aggression and substance abuse and increased levels of social-emotional competence (Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose, & Tremblay, 2005). The Second Step program teaches students proactive strategies that help prevent strong emotions from escalating into negative behaviors. These strategies, such as deep, centered breathing and positive self-talk, help students focus and calm themselves instead of acting on their first impulse. As a result, students are better able to use other skills, such as problem solving, to help them get along better with others and make good choices.

Problem Solving

Many different interpersonal problems can adversely affect children's success in school (Duckworth, Tsukayama, & May, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). Second Step SEL builds on students' ability to handle peer conflicts effectively. Based on research on effective patterns of thinking, students are taught first to calm down, then to follow four Problem-Solving Steps: S: Say the problem, T: Think of solutions, E: Explore consequences, and P: Pick the best solution (Naglieri & Rojahn, 2004). Being able to engage effectively in social problem solving helps children choose prosocial solutions to their problems (Riggs, Jahromi, Razza, Dillworth-Bart, & Mueller, 2006). Students who know how to respond to common problem situations help create a safer, more respectful school climate where more students can learn and succeed (Orpinas & Horne, 2006).

Decreasing Problem Behaviors: Risk and Protective Factors

Second Step SEL helps prevent a range of problem behaviors by targeting the risk and protective factors that are best addressed in the classroom. Risk factors such as peer rejection, impulsiveness, and aggressive behavior put students at risk for involvement in harmful behaviors like delinquency and substance abuse (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004). Protective factors, including social-emotional competence, self-regulation skills, and school connectedness, prevent the onset—or buffer the risks—of problem behavior and promote school success (Hawkins et al., 2000).

Conclusion

Second Step SEL teaches students the skills they need to be successful in school. With each unit, students build self-regulation and social-emotional skills that support their academic achievement and prevent them from engaging in harmful behaviors. Students improve their ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. Socially and emotionally competent students feel more connected to school and to their peers, thus creating a healthy, safe, and respectful school climate for all (Durlak et al., 2011).

References

Arsenio, W. F., Cooperman, S., & Lover, A. (2000). Affective predictors of preschoolers' aggression and peer acceptance. *Developmental Psychology, 36*, 438–448.Baddeley, A. D. (2007). *Working memory, thought and action.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Blair, C. (2002). School readiness: Integrating cognition and emotion in a neurobiological conceptualization of children's functioning at school entry. *American Psychologist, 57*, 107–111.

Blair, C., & Razza, R. P. (2007). Relating effortful control, executive-function, and false belief understanding to emerging math and literacy ability in kindergarten. *Child Development, 78*(2), 647–663.

Caprara, G. V., Barbaranelli, C., Steca, P., & Malone, P. S. (2006). Teachers' self-effcacy beliefs as determinants of job satisfaction and students' academic achievement: A study at the school level. *Journal of School Psychology, 44*, 473–490. doi:10.1016/j.jsp.2006.09.001

Catalano, R. F., Haggerty, K. P., Oesterle, S., Fleming, C. B., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). The importance of bonding to school for healthy development: Findings from the Social Development Research Group. *Journal of School Health, 74*(7), 252–261.

Cohen, J., McCabe, E. M., Michelli, N. M., & Pickeral, T. (2009). School climate: Research, policy, practice, and teacher education. *Teachers College Record, 111*, 180–213.

Denham, S. A., Brown, C., & Domitrovich, C. E. (2010). "Plays nice with others": Social-emotional learning and academic success. *Early Education and Development, 21*(5), 652–680. doi:10.1080/10409289.2010.497450

Duckworth, A. L., Tsukayama, E., & May, H. (2010). Establishing causality using longitudinal hierarchical linear modeling: An illustration predicting achievement from self-control. *Social Psychology and Personality Science, 1*(4), 311–317.

Duncan, G. J., Dowsett, C. J., Claessens, A., Magnuson, K., Huston, A. C., Klebanov, P., et al. (2007). School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology 43*(6), 1428–1446.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405–432. doi:10.1111/j.1467- 8624.2010.01564.x

Eisenberg, N., Eggum, N. D., & Di Giunta, L. (2010). Empathy-related Responding: Associations with prosocial behavior, aggression, and intergroup relations. *Social Issues and Policy Review, 4*(1), 143–180. doi:10.1111/ j.1751-2409.2010.01020.x

Eisenberg, N., Fabes, R. A., Guthrie, I. K., & Reiser, M. (2000). Dispositional emotionality and regulation: Their role in predicting quality of social functioning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*, 136–157.

Eisenberg, N., Guthrie, I. K., Fabes, R. A., Shepard, S., Losoya, S., Murphy, B. C., . . . , Reiser, M. (2000). Prediction of elementary school children's externalizing problem behaviors from attentional and behavioral regulation and negative emotionality. *Child Development, 71*(5), 1367–1387.

Eisenberg, N., Spinrad, T. L., Fabes, R. A., Reiser, M., Cumberland, A., Shepard, S. A., . . . , Thompson, M. (2004). The relations of effortful control and impulsivity to children's resiliency and adjustment. *Child Development, 75*(1), 25–46.

Flook, L., Repetti, R. L., & Ullman, J. B. (2005). Classroom social experiences as predictors of academic performance. *Developmental Psychology, 41*(2), 319–327.

Hawkins, J., Herrenkohl, T., Farrington, D., Brewer, D., Catalano, R., Harachi, T., & Cothern, L. (2000, April). Predictors of youth violence. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

Howse, R. B., Lange, G., Farran, D. C., & Boyles, C. D. (2003). Motivation and self-regulation as predictors of achievement in economically disadvantaged young children. Journal of *Experimental Education, 71*(2), 151–174.

Izard, C., Fine, S., Schultz, D., Mostow, A., Ackerman, B., & Youngstrom, E. (2001). Emotion knowledge as a predictor of social behavior and academic competence in children at risk. *Psychological Science, 12*(1), 18–23.

Malecki, C. K., & Elliott, S. N. (2002). Children's social behaviors as predictors of academic achievement: A longitudinal analysis. *School Psychology Quarterly, 17*, 1–23.

McClelland, M. M., Ponitz, C. C., Messersmith, E. E., & Tominey, S. (2010). Self-regulation: Re-integration of cognition and emotion. In R. Lerner (Series Ed.) & W. Overton (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of lifespan human development, Vol. 4. Cognition, biology, and methods* (pp. 509–553). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

McLaughlin, K. A., Hatzenbuehler, M. L., Mennin, D. S., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (2011). Emotion dysregulation and adolescent psychopathology: A prospective study. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 49*(9), 544–554. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2011.06.003

Naglieri, J. A., & Rojahn, J. (2004). Construct validity of the PASS theory and CAS: Correlations with achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 96*(1), 174–181. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.96.1.174

Orpinas, P., & Horne, A. M. (2006). *Bullying prevention: Creating a positive school climate and developing social competence.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Raver, C. C., & Knitzer, J. (2002). *Ready to enter: What research tells policymakers about strategies to promote social and emotional school readiness among three- and four-year old children* (Policy Paper No. 3). New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

Resnick, M.D., Ireland, M., & Borowsky, I. (2004). Youth violence perpetration: what protects? What predicts? Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 35*(5), 424. e1–424.e10.

Riggs, N. R., Jahromi, L. B., Razza, R. P., Dillworth-Bart, J. E., & Mueller, U. (2006). Executive function and the promotion of social-emotional competence. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 27*, 300–309.

Shaw, D. S., Gilliom, M., Ingoldsby, E. M., & Nagin, D. S. (2003). Trajectories leading to school-age conduct problems. Developmental *Psychology, 39*(2), 189–200.

Thompson, R. A., & Raikes, H. A. (2007). The social and emotional foundations of school readiness. In D. F. Perry, R. K. Kaufmann, & J. Knitzer (Eds.). *Social and emotional health in early childhood: Building bridges between services and systems* (pp. 13–37). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Trentacosta, C. J., & Izard, C. E. (2007). Kindergarten children's emotion competence as a predictor of their academic competence in first grade. *Emotion, 7,* 77–88.

Vitaro, F., Brendgen, M., Larose, S., & Tremblay, R. E. (2005). Kindergarten disruptive behaviors, protective factors, and educational achievement by early adulthood. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 97*(4), 617–629. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.97.4.617

Welsh, M., Parke, R. D., Widaman, K., & O'Neil, R. (2001). Linkages between children's social and academic competence: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of School Psychology, 39*(6), 463–482.