

Changes in Social-Emotional Skills and Behaviour in Preschool Children after Participation in the Promoting Mental Health at Schools Program: The Social-Emotional Skills of Parents as a Mediator

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ABSTRACT

The social-emotional skills of preschool children develop at a rapid pace. How this development occurs is closely related to the child’s environment. The social-emotional skills of the parents themselves play an important role in the development of a preschool child’s social-emotional skills and have a strong influence on the development of children’s prosocial behaviour and a reduction in behavioural problems (both internalised and externalised).

The aim of this study is to find out how the indicators of social-emotional competence and behaviour of preschool children change after participating in the Promoting Mental Health at Schools programme, based on teachers’ assessments. What is the relationship between the social-emotional skills of parents (parents’ assessment) and the social-emotional skills and behaviour of their children (teachers’ assessment)? Do higher SE skills of parents (self-assessed) mediate the growth of children’s social-emotional skills (as assessed by teachers)?

As part of the Erasmus+ research project “Promoting Mental Health at Schools” (PROMEHS), a quasi-experimental study was carried out with pre-test and post-test measurements in experimental and control groups. It was found that in the sample of Latvian pre-schoolers, the teachers from the experimental group noticed the decrease in children’s behavioural difficulties and increase in prosocial behaviour and social-emotional skills in the experimental group were rated slightly higher in comparison with control group. Teachers rated children’s social understanding and relationship skills higher when parents indicated that the relationship with their child was better. A higher level of social-emotional competence of parents correlated negatively with children’s conduct problems. This study did not find that parents played

a statistically significant role as mediators in the promotion of children's social-emotional competence during implementation of the programme.

Keywords: emotional and behavioural difficulties, parents' social emotional skills, PROMEHHS, prosocial behaviour, preschool children, social-emotional skills

Introduction

The importance of social-emotional learning and its connection with the maintenance and preservation of mental health is increasingly being discussed and emphasised worldwide. Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which everyone realises their potential, copes with the stress of everyday life, works productively, and is able to contribute to the development of their community. Studies emphasise that mental health is not just the absence of mental illness or symptoms, but it is an integral part of overall health, which includes the ability to interact socially and thus be more successful in providing for oneself, tolerating stress and being able to enjoy life in general. Mental health promotion requires attention from an early age. In the last decade, there has been an increase in children's mental health problems, and according to the World Health Organization, it is reported that up to 20% of school-age children already suffer from mental health difficulties and these difficulties begin to develop at an early age (WHO, 2015; 2018).

At preschool age, there is a rapid development of children's social-emotional skills. How this development takes place is closely related to the child's environment. There are several ways that social-emotional skills are defined and evaluated. In this study, social-emotional skills are evaluated based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional learning model (CASEL). Based on this model, social-emotional competence is viewed as a set of skills: self-awareness – recognising emotions and thoughts; the ability to connect one's emotions and thoughts with one's behaviour; self-management – the ability to regulate one's thoughts, emotions and behaviour in different situations; social awareness – the ability to take the other's perspective, developing empathy, accepting diversity; relationship-building skills – the ability to create and maintain relationships with different people and groups; responsible decision-making – the ability to make decisions taking into account the well-being of others. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is defined as an integral part of the learning process that ensures that the learning process takes place to its fullest (CASEL, 2021).

Research emphasises the need to pay attention to issues of social-emotional development in children from an early age. One of the ways in which mental health difficulties manifest is through the externalising (directed at the external environment) or internalising (directed at the self) of behavioural problems (Boylan et al., 2012). Social-emotional learning is cited as one of the most

effective interventions to maintain and preserve mental health and prevent behavioural problems (Durlak et al., 2011). Self-awareness, including the ability to identify emotions, is one of the first skills that children develop at an early age and is associated with higher academic skills as children enter school (Denham et al, 2003). From the age of two, children begin to recognise emotions more and more accurately. Recognising emotions in different situations and being able to regulate them is associated with a more successful relationships with peers. In a study in which social-emotional skills were taught to 2-3-year-old children, it was found that these children show more prosocial behaviour, which was manifested as helping, sharing and comforting (Brazzelli et al., 2021). Children who demonstrate more prosocial behaviour are accepted better into the peer group (Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2017). These children are evaluated by teachers to have higher prosocial behaviour and more successful cooperation abilities in interaction with peers (Arsenio et al., 2000; Denham et al., 1990). A higher social-emotional competence in children is associated with a greater ability to avoid disruptive behaviour (Elias & Mocerri, 2012). Children's emotion recognition and regulation skills are manifested in the context of social interaction (Camras & Halberstadt, 2017). The way an individual feels and expresses perceived emotions is influenced by both the innate temperament – emotional reactivity, and social and environmental factors, such as poverty, family conflicts, child abuse. These factors can impair a child's ability to regulate their emotions (Thomas, Chess, & Birch, 1970; Thompson, 2014).

The implementation of supportive measures in schools is considered to be one of the most successful approaches for both children and teachers. Interventions can develop skills to deal with emotional and behavioural problems (WHO, 2021). Intervention studies research also mentions the relationship between parents' social-emotional competence and the development of a child's social-emotional skills. Parents' own social-emotional skills play an important role in the development of a preschool child's social-emotional skills and greatly influence the development of children's prosocial behaviour and the reduction of behaviour problems (both internalised and externalised) (Mortensen & Barnett, 2019; Wu et al., 2020). Studies examining the relationship between parents' beliefs about emotions, their social-emotional competences, and school-age children's emotion management skills indicate that parental beliefs and social-emotional competences explain 37% of children's emotion recognition abilities. Associations have been found between higher parental social-emotional competence and the better ability of children to regulate their emotions (Castro et al., 2015; Rogers et al., 2015). Children's social-emotional competence is influenced by both the child's individual characteristics and how social-emotional competence is developed in parents and the child's teachers (Garner et al., 2014). Research has found a relationship between a parent criticizing or punishing a child and the child's difficulty

in regulating their emotions (Rogers et al., 2015). Emotion regulation abilities at age 5 have been found to be associated with social skills at age 7 and general peer acceptance at age 10 (Blair et al., 2015). The pattern of increasing differentiation mostly explains the recognition of emotions as a learned rather than an innate skill, which indicates the significant importance assigned by culture to the way that emotions are understood and defined (Halberstadt & Lozada, 2011).

Researchers note that there are relatively few scientifically reliable tools for assessing children's social-emotional skills. SSIS (SEL Brief Scales – Preschool Form) is recognised as one of the effective assessment tools for preschool children. Importantly, this tool includes multi-informant assessments – both teacher and parent surveys, which help to assess children's skills more comprehensively (Anthony et al., 2020). The SDQ (Strength and Difficulties) survey is designed to assess children's behaviour problems and prosocial behaviour. This survey also includes a multi-informant assessment of children's behaviour (Stone et al., 2010).

Studies mention the need to include not only children but also adults in social-emotional learning interventions. Therefore, it is important that interventions include not only children, but teachers and parents are also involved in the training, and they have the opportunity to improve their socio-emotional competence (Cefai et al., 2018). It is important to think about the development of the social-emotional competence of school personnel, which is related to their further ability to teach it more effectively to children using the appropriate methods (Justo et al., 2018). There is increased thinking about the development and implementation of evidence-based social-emotional curricula and methods in the school environment. Researchers emphasise the need to create programmes that could be systematically implemented more widely. Most social-emotional learning programmes are preventive and results of studies indicate that learning them is more effective in groups of children at a younger age, when behavioural tendencies are still beginning to develop (Fisak et al., 2011). The Promoting Mental Health at Schools programme (PROMEHS) was developed within the framework of the Erasmus + project, and its aim was to develop, implement and scientifically test methodological materials for increasing of social-emotional skills and resilience and reducing risky behaviour at school and preschool. The research is carried out within the framework of this programme and answers are sought to the following questions:

- Q1 How do the measurements of social-emotional skills and behaviour of preschool children change after participating in the Promoting Mental Health at Schools programme, based on teachers' assessments?
- Q2 Will higher parents' social-emotional skills be associated with higher children's social-emotional skills and lower behaviour problems (as rated by teachers)?

Q3 Do higher parents' social-emotional skills (as assessed by parents) mediate the growth of children's social-emotional skills (as assessed by teachers)?

Methodology

Participants

As part of the Erasmus+ project "Promoting Mental Health at Schools" (PROMEHS), a quasi-experimental study was conducted in October 2020 and April 2021 with pre-test and post-test data measurements for children aged 4–16 years in seven European countries: Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Croatia, Romania, Greece and Malta. Children from 7 preschools in Latvia participated in this part of the study. Participants were split into control and experimental groups. This study uses 488 teacher measurements of preschool children aged 4 to 6 years (mean age = 4.84; *SD* 0.84). Both genders were equally represented (50.3% boys and 49.7% girls). Parents evaluated their own social-emotional skills.

Measures

Teachers filled out the following surveys about the children:

- **The Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire** (SDQ, Goldman, 1997) teachers' form. The questionnaire includes 25 items and 5 subscales. Four of them represent difficulties: emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems. The fifth subscale represents prosocial behaviour. Each item is measured on a 3 point Likert scale rating from 0 (not true) to 2 (certainly true).
- **Social Skills Improvement System Social-Emotional Learning Brief Scale** (SSIS SEL, Elliott et al., 2020 a, b). The teacher K12 form evaluated children's social emotional competence. The questionnaire includes 20 items and 5 subscales: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Each item is measured on a 4 point Likert scale rating from 0 (never) to 3 (almost always).

Parents filled out the survey about their own social-emotional skills:

- **Social-Emotional Competences of Teachers** (SECTRS, Tom, 2012). The survey was modified within the framework of this study by adapting it to the sample of parents. The questionnaire includes 53 items and 4 subscales: parent-children's relationships, emotion regulation, social-awareness, interpersonal relationships. Each item is measured on a 6 point Likert scale rating from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree).
- **Demographic data are also collected:** child's age, gender, belonging to a vulnerable group.

Table 1. Internal consistency of each scale and composite scales of SDQ, SSIS SEL based on preschool children's ($n = 488$) teacher evaluations. Parents' evaluations ($n = 488$) of their own social-emotional skills (SECTRS).

	Scales	Cronbach's Alpha
		Teachers' evaluation
SDQ	Emotional problems	0.797
	Conduct problems	0.746
	Hyperactivity	0.871
	Peer problems	0.725
	Total difficulty*	0.895
	Prosocial behaviour	0.777
SSIS SEL	Self-awareness	0.758
	Self-management	0.741
	Social awareness	0.810
	Relationship skills	0.757
	Responsible decision-making	0.846
	Social-emotional competence**	0.932
SECTRS		Parents' evaluation
	Parent-children's relationships	0.823
	Emotion regulation	0.747
	Social awareness	0.702
	Interpersonal relationships	0.694
	Parents social-emotional competence***	0.921

*refers to composite scale combining the SDQ difficulty subscales

**refers to composite scale combining the SSIS-SEL subscales

*** refers to composite scale combining the SECTRS subscales

Results

The internal consistency of the survey scales was determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient. A coefficient of 0.7 indicates sufficiently high coherence. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, which was used to determine whether the sample followed a normal distribution, indicates that non-parametric methods will be used to further calculate the data because the sample does not follow a normal distribution.

Children were matched by code to combine the pre-test and post-test score, where only children who had scores in both tests were included in the data set. Missing values were replaced by the mean test item score. Internalising difficulty, externalising difficulty and total difficulty range from 1 to 3, where the larger the mean score, the higher the difficulty. Prosocial behaviour scores range

from 1 to 3, where the larger the mean score, the higher the intention to help others. Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making and social-emotional learning range from 1 to 4, where the larger the mean score, the higher the level of social-emotional learning.

Regression analysis shows that for a child in the experimental group, the increase in social-emotional learning is 0.008 points more than a child in the control group, given that they both have the same score in the pre-test (see Table 2). Regression analysis shows that for a child in the experimental group, the reduction in the externalising difficulty score is 0.024 points more than a child in the control group, given that they both have the same score in the pre-test (Table 3). Regression analysis shows that for a child in the experimental group, the increase in prosocial behaviour score is 0.065 points more than a child in the control group, given that they both have the same score in the pre-test (Table 3). Although these differences are not significant for the Latvian preschool sample, they show a positive trend in the long term which means that the programme was effective.

Table 2. Teachers' reports of children's Social-Emotional Competences

	Group	Phase	Mean	Sd
Self-awareness	Experimental	Pre	2.78	0.50
		Post	2.95	0.55
	Control	Pre	2.93	0.63
		Post	3.00	0.60
Self-management	Experimental	Pre	2.82	0.54
		Post	2.89	0.55
	Control	Pre	2.96	0.63
		Post	3.02	0.61
Social awareness	Experimental	Pre	2.87	0.56
		Post	3.02	0.58
	Control	Pre	2.97	0.61
		Post	3.04	0.63
Relationship skills	Experimental	Pre	2.96	0.53
		Post	3.03	0.53
	Control	Pre	3.06	0.58
		Post	3.13	0.58
Responsible decision-making	Experimental	Pre	2.92	0.57
		Post	3.06	0.58
	Control	Pre	3.08	0.67
		Post	3.20	0.62

Table 3. Teachers' reports of children's Behaviour difficulties and Prosocial behaviour

	Group	Phase	Mean	Sd
Internalising difficulties	Experimental	Pre	1.42	0.36
		Post	1.40	0.32
	Control	Pre	1.35	0.35
		Post	1.32	0.30
Externalising difficulties	Experimental	Pre	1.61	0.45
		Post	1.54	0.42
	Control	Pre	1.48	0.42
		Post	1.48	0.42
Total difficulty	Experimental	Pre	1.52	0.34
		Post	1.47	0.31
	Control	Pre	1.41	0.33
		Post	1.40	0.31
Prosocial behaviour	Experimental	Pre	2.32	0.45
		Post	2.40	0.41
	Control	Pre	2.37	0.42
		Post	2.39	0.45

There is a statistically significant negative correlation between children's conduct problems and better parent-children's relationships ($r = -0.15$, $p < 0.01$) and a statistically significant negative correlation between children's conduct problems and better parents' interpersonal relationships ($r = -0.09$, $p < 0.05$). In general, higher parental Total social-emotional skills correlate with fewer child conduct problems ($r = -0.13$, $p < 0.01$). Better parent-child relationships correlate with overall lower teacher-rated child total difficulties ($r = -0.10$, $p < 0.01$). There is a statistically significant positive correlation between better parent-child relationships and children exhibiting more prosocial behaviour ($r = -0.15$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 4). The higher statistic of children's social-awareness (rated by teachers) shows a significantly positive correlation with parent-children's relationships ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$) and also the statistic of relationship skills shows a significantly positive correlation with parent-child relationships ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$). Other correlations are not statistically significant (see Table 5).

Table 4. Correlations measuring associations between SDQ (teachers’ evaluations) and SECTRS scales (parents’ evaluations) in preschool children’s sample (n = 488)

SDQ (rated by teachers)	SECTRS (rated by parents)				
	Parent-children’s relationships	Emotion regulation	Social awareness	Interpersonal relationships	Total SEL parents
Emotional problems	-0.04	-0.01	-0.03	-0.02	-0.01
Conduct problems	-0.15**	-0.09	-0.08	-0.09*	-0.13**
Hyperactivity	-0.08	-0.04	-0.02	-0.04	-0.06
Peer problems	-0.07	-0.07	-0.05	-0.05	-0.07
Total difficulty	-0.10*	-0.06	-0.05	-0.05	-0.07
Prosocial behaviour	0.11*	0.01	0.05	0.04	0.06

*p < .05, **p < .01

Table 5. Correlations measuring associations between SSIS (teachers’ evaluations) and SECTRS scales (parents’ evaluations) in preschool children’s sample (n = 488)

SSIS SEL (rated by teachers)	SECTRS (rated by parents)				
	Parent-children’s relationships	Emotion regulation	Social awareness	Interpersonal relationships	Total SEL parents
Self-awareness	0.01	-0.03	-0.04	-0.01	-0.02
Self-management	0.09	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.06
Social awareness	0.11*	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.07
Relationship skills	0.10*	0.04	0.03	0.06	0.07
Responsible decision-making	0.08	0.07	0.01	0.02	0.06
SEL total	0.07	0.03	-0.01	0.03	0.04

*p < .05, **p < .01

The mediation model was built to answer the last question of this study. The first model, which relates child social-emotional competence pre-test to child social-emotional competence post-test, yields a total effect size of $c = 0.685$. The Sobel test shows that it is significant. The second model, which relates parents’ social-emotional competence to child social-emotional competence pre-test, yields the effect size of $a = 0.064$ which is not statistically significant. The third model, which relates child social-emotional competence post-test to parents’ social-emotional competence, yields the size of the effect $b = 1.230$ which is not statistically significant (see Figure 1).

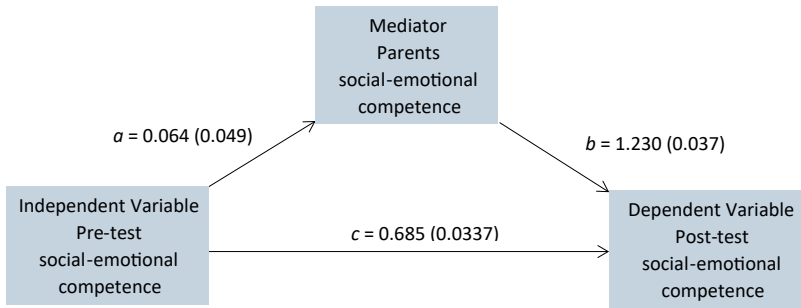


Figure 1. Direct and indirect effect in a mediation model.

Discussion

Pre-test and post-test results in the Latvian preschool sample show a positive trend which means that teachers of the experimental group noticed a decrease of children's behavioural difficulties better and increase of pro-social behaviour in comparison with the control group and also social-emotional skills in the experimental group are rated slightly higher. The results correlate with previous studies, which indicates that implementation of the social-emotional learning program increased pro-social behaviour and decreased behavioural difficulties in children (Brazzelli et al., 2021; Elias & Mocerri, 2012). In an analysis of all six European countries in which the Promoting Mental Health at Schools (PROMEHS) programme was implemented, the results indicate a statistically significant effectiveness rating, meaning that the programme is rated as successful in promoting socio-emotional competence and prosocial behaviour and reducing behavioural difficulties (Cefai et al., 2022).

Teachers rate children's social understanding and relationship skills higher when parents indicate that their relationship with their child is better. Although this study does not show a statistically significant relationship between children's social-emotional competence (assessed by teachers) and parents self-assessed total social-emotional skills, it can be concluded that the quality of the parent-child relationship could be a valuable resource for a child's ability to make social contacts outside the home environment. Moreover, the results of this study confirm those of previous studies that concluded that higher parent social-emotional competence correlates with lower behavioural difficulties and higher prosocial behaviour in children (Mortensen & Barnett, 2019; Wu et al., 2020). In this study from the teachers' perspective, pro-social behaviour is demonstrated more in preschool children where a better parent-child relationship is evident. In

this study a significant relationship between the social-emotional competence of parents and children's self-management was not demonstrated, although there is a positive trend.

This study did not find that parents played a statistically significant role as mediators in the promotion of children's social-emotional competence during the implementation of the programme. Parents were encouraged to complete home activities together with their preschool children, and parents were invited to listen to three lectures on the principles of implementing the programme and instructions on how to use the handbook in the online version. However, parents' involvement in the programme was not controlled. The results indicate that social-emotional learning programmes implemented in educational institutions are particularly important and social-emotional learning can be successfully implemented in the preschool environment. These are especially important for vulnerable groups in society, including when the social-emotional competence of parents is low. Despite the fact that PROMEHS is a universal social-emotional learning programme, it has also been evaluated as effective for children from vulnerable groups (Cefai et al., 2022). Other studies also indicate that social-emotional learning is associated with children's higher achievements in academic studies, including literacy assessments, more successful relationships with peers and, in general, with the higher motivation of those involved in the learning process (Cavioni et al., 2020; Martinsone et al., 2022).

The established research results once again indicate that social-emotional learning is an integral part of the learning process. It is important to teach those skills from an early age. School plays an important role in reducing children's behavioural problems and increasing prosocial behaviour.

Conclusions

- Children who took part in the PROMEHS programme, showed a higher increase in social-emotional skills compared to children in the control group.
- Children who took part in the PROMEHS programme, showed a greater reduction in externalised behavioural difficulties and a greater increase in pro-social behaviour compared to children in the control group.
- Higher parent-reported overall social-emotional skills and higher parent-reported parent-child relationships are associated with lower teacher-reported behavioural difficulties in children.
- Better parent-child relationships are positively associated with higher children's social awareness, indicating that parent-child relationships help children to develop more successful social relationships outside the home environment.

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