

# Study: Classroom focus on social and emotional skills can lead to academic gains

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Classroom programs designed to improve elementary school students' social and emotional skills can also increase reading and math achievement, even if academic improvement is not a direct goal of the skills building, according to a study to be published this month in *American Educational Research Journal (AERJ)*. The benefit holds true for students across a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

In the study, "[Efficacy of the Responsive Classroom Approach: Results from a Three Year, Longitudinal Randomized Controlled Trial](#)," researchers Sara Rimm-Kaufman (University of Virginia), Ross A. Larsen (University of Virginia), Alison A. Baroody (University of Virginia), Timothy Curby (George Mason University), Michelle Ko (University of Virginia), Julia B. Thomas (University of Virginia), Eileen G. Merritt (University of Virginia), Tashia Abry (Arizona State University), and Jamie DeCoster (University of Virginia), looked specifically at Responsive Classroom (RC), a widely-used social and [emotional learning](#) intervention.

The study, funded by a grant from the Institute for Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education, is among just a handful of randomized controlled trials that have examined the effect of social and emotional learning interventions on student achievement.

"We find that at the very least, supporting students' social and emotional growth in the classroom does not interfere with academic learning," said Rimm-Kaufman, professor at the University of Virginia Curry School of

Education. "When [teachers](#) receive adequate levels of training and support, using practices that support students' social and emotional growth actually boosts achievement."

Math and reading gains were similar among those students who qualified for free and reduced-priced lunch and those who were not.

"The success of many curricula, including those that map onto the Common Core expectations, require that teachers use effective classroom management and develop student confidence and autonomy," said Rimm-Kaufman. "Our trial of the Responsive Classroom approach suggests that teachers who take the time to foster relationships in the classroom and support children's self-control actually enhance student achievement."

"In a time of intense academic demands, many critics question the value of spending time on teaching social skills, building classroom relationships and supporting student autonomy," said Rimm-Kaufman. "Our research shows that time spent supporting children's social and emotional abilities can be a very wise investment."

For the study, researchers followed a group of students and teachers at 24 elementary schools over three years, from the end of the students' second-grade year until the end of their fifth-grade year, and compared student math and reading achievement between thirteen schools that adopted RC and eleven schools that did not.

Teachers being trained in the RC approach received two one week-long training sessions delivered in consecutive summers. Despite the same initial training, schools varied in their use of RC practices. The study found that [student achievement](#) gains were evident in classrooms where teachers who had been trained were using the RC practices fully and in ways that were consistent with the program goals. Teachers tended to use

the RC practices well if they felt that the principals at their school supported them.

"Our findings raise important questions about the support of teachers in implementing social and emotional learning interventions such as RC," said Rimm-Kaufman. "Because RC was most effective in classrooms where teachers were supported in implementation, thoughtful school leadership is important to success."

Social and emotional learning interventions are designed to teach [students](#) the social and emotional skills considered foundational to academic learning. The RC approach focuses on enhancing teachers' capacity to create caring, well-managed classroom environments, by providing practical teaching strategies designed to support social, academic, and self-regulatory skills and bolster respectful and productive [classroom](#) interactions.

Provided by American Educational Research Association

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