

# Curriculum based on direct contact, mutual respect and empathy exercises is "hate-preventative," say researchers

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Racial prejudice is a major issue in this November's presidential election. A new Tel Aviv University study published in the August 2016 issue of the *Journal of School Psychology* reports on a new system that creates sustainable tolerance while combatting racism and prejudice.

The Extended Class Exchange Program (ECEP) is geared to third- and fourth-grade Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian students. The program's bimonthly meetings and classes are based on direct and structured contact, a curriculum that promotes mutual respect and acceptance of the "other," and skill training focusing on empathy and perspective-taking—that is, understanding other people's thoughts, feelings, desires, motivations and intentions.

The program, led by Dr. Rony Berger of the Stress, Crisis and Trauma Program at TAU's Bob Shapell School of Social Work and Dr. Hisham Abu-Raiya, also of the Shapell School, was launched with the Arab-Jewish Community Center (AJCC) in Jaffa and the Tel Aviv Municipality to respond to growing tensions resulting from the continued escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## **An emphasis on compassion and empathy**

"We've taught Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian children to be compassionate and empathetic—not only toward their friends in the

program, but also toward people outside the classroom," said Dr. Berger. "It's very hard to bring people together technically, logistically and emotionally. People don't want to interact with people they feel uncomfortable around. In this research, we targeted various skills such as perspective-taking, empathy and compassion that can be taught to promote sustainable tolerance."

"Contact alone is not enough," said Dr. Abu-Raiya. "You need a system that includes a variety of different approaches. We demonstrated that giving the children direct contact with each other, providing unbiased knowledge about the children and their communities and building perspective-taking and empathy-nurturing skills have long-term positive effects.

"The effects were all maintained 15 months after the program ended, when the region was engulfed by violence. This highlights the 'hate-preventative' potential of the program to prevent stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination than often lead to hostilities between [ethnic groups](#)."

The program featured bimonthly "schooldays" of third- and fourth-grade Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian students led by six facilitators. The program included art activities, classes promoting respect and acceptance of the "other," and empathy and perspective-taking training directed by the students' homeroom teachers and the ECEP facilitators.

"We have no doubt that the ECEP helped reduce prejudice and discrimination and enhanced positive contact between different ethnic groups and could be translated to any region characterized by ethnic tension and violent conflict," said Dr. Berger.

## **Fighting stereotypes and discrimination**

The team conducted two studies. The first, conducted on 262 fourth-

grade students from Tel Aviv and Jaffa, found a dramatically higher inclination to interact with students from other ethnic groups, more positive thoughts about "the other," and less emotional prejudice. The second, conducted on 322 third- and four-grade Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian students, included new sessions on empathy and perspective-taking training and assessed the extended impact of the program.

"All of our results showed that the ECEP decreased stereotyping and discriminatory tendencies toward the other and increased positive feelings and readiness for social contact with the other upon termination of the program," said Dr. Berger.

"Empirical support for the ECEP is particularly important in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, given the evidence that negative views and stereotypes held by both Arab and Jews fuel the animosity between these ethnic groups," said Dr. Abu-Raiya.

The researchers will next research the particular ingredients that prevent the development of negative intergroup attitudes in order to build a new preventive program promote pro-social behaviors.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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