

Socio-emotional learning (SEL) found to reduce hyperactivity and improve sociability of Brazilian children

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Socio-emotional development is a versatile skill that should be encouraged from early childhood, given that it facilitates learning and

also professional and personal relationships. In the Brazilian and Latin American curriculum, however, this theme is incipient and still little applied in schools and early childhood education centers, a fact that adds to other obstacles found in the public education of middle and low-income countries, whose shortage of resources make it difficult for more complex structural implementations.

Taking this into account, a Brazilian study evaluated the impacts of applying quick and accessible socio-emotional learning strategies, the SEL Kernels, on children in the state of Rio de Janeiro during a school year.

The research was recently published in the journal *Early Education and Development* and was carried out by the D'Or Institute for Research and Education (IDOR), in collaboration with researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, National School of Public Health (ENSP), and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

When we talk about intelligence, it is common to think about the volume of knowledge, level of education, or intellectual skills. What we do not consider, and which often passes us by from childhood to adulthood, is the importance and development of emotional and social intelligence.

Understanding social relationships, being able to regulate emotions, and dealing with challenges are skills that impact all other aspects of life. Whether at school, family, work, or in the relationship with oneself, it is important for these aspects to be stimulated since our early years.

Currently, many educators, parents, and scientists are collaborating to establish in [early childhood](#) education the so-called Socio-emotional Learning (SEL), an evidence-based pedagogical methodology that encourages people to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy, in addition to maintaining positive

relationships, associated with better decision making.

Although it was designed for children's pedagogy, today it is already applied to different audiences, including adults. Adherence to this learning in Latin American schools, however, is still incipient and the number of studies involving the application of SEL in the continent is gradually gaining volume.

"In addition to allowing children to relate in a healthier and more constructive way with their peers, family members, and other people around them, socio-emotional development also contributes to learning. When children have well-developed socio-emotional skills, they have greater concentration, [self-regulation](#), and problem-solving skills."

"This helps them deal with challenges and adapt to new situations, facilitating their learning process. By stimulating socio-emotional development from early childhood, we are preparing children to be emotionally intelligent adults, capable of adapting to different contexts, dealing with challenges, and relating in a healthy way, both personally and professionally," explains the first author of the article and doctor recently graduated from IDOR, Ana Luiza Colagrossi.

Aiming to contribute to the Latin American scientific body and to bring more information about the feasibility and effectiveness of this methodology in the education of Brazilian children aged 3 to 6 years, the current study used a strand of socio-emotional learning entitled SEL Kernels, which consists of short, 5–15 minute activities that can be applied in any classroom to develop social and emotional skills in children.

Other socio-emotional learning methodologies require more uptime and often need resources that are inaccessible to public schools like those in Brazil, therefore, SEL Kernels was chosen because it is a low-cost and

flexible implementation, allowing teachers to select the strategies and activities that best meet the needs and goals of their classroom and students.

To carry out the research, the SEL Kernels strategies were translated and adapted to Brazilian Portuguese with the collaboration of specialists and early childhood education teachers. Then, four public educational centers were selected in the state of Rio de Janeiro, two in the city of Paraty, where the method was applied, and another two in the city of Angra dos Reis were used as a control group.

In total, 205 children had SEL Kernels implemented throughout the school year, while 109 children of a similar age composed the control group and followed the standard pedagogical routine. Data about the application of SEL Kernels were reported by teachers, according to the progression of each student in 5 assessment domains: hyperactivity, conduct problems, emotional problems, peer problems, and prosocial behavior.

The researchers paid great attention to introducing SEL Kernels to teachers and included other adults involved in the children's routine in conversations about the project, such as directors, canteen professionals, caregivers, and parents. WhatsApp was also an important tool for sharing practices among teachers.

The research results showed that children who participated in the program had improvement in different areas. Regarding conduct problems, there was a reduction of almost 50% in the values, indicating that the children presented better behavior.

In hyperactivity, there was also a significant reduction, of approximately 60%, and peer problems also decreased by a similar percentage, indicating that children had fewer difficulties in relationships with their

colleagues and increased prosocial attitudes. These improvements were statistically significant and had measurable effects, showing that SEL Kernels had a positive impact in these areas.

"What this study shows is the power and the simplicity of SEL Kernels. The activities and strategies are based on the teacher's practice. They are easy to implement and flexible, allowing them to integrate the activities into existing curricula and routines, selecting those that best respond to the needs of their students," comments the researcher.

The assessment of emotional problems was the only one that didn't show significant results in any of the studied groups, all other items had medium to high positive impacts on children exposed to SEL. The authors believe that the lack of evidence related to the impact of SEL Kernels on the [emotional problems](#) report can be due to the particularity that the children studied already demonstrated high emotional development for their age group.

Another point highlighted in the article was that activities related to these skills were the last to be introduced during the implementation process, and perhaps needed more time to reveal relevant results.

An additional finding was that SEL Kernels do not determine positive impacts only for children. Teachers' experience was also evaluated during the implementation, and topics such as executive function and self-regulation were discussed along with their experiences and daily practices. The professionals reported that the method helped them improve their sense of self-efficacy and positive mindset throughout the [school year](#).

The researchers conclude that the use of SEL Kernels is an accessible and relevant proposal for [early childhood education](#), and can be a pedagogical resource that reverberates positively throughout the lives of

individuals. They point out that the intervention was more decisive in the results than the initial difficulties some children had in the evaluation topics.

Although most research carried out in the Northern Hemisphere indicates that children's basic skills are stronger predictors of results than any intervention, the study authors believe that there are contextual factors that could explain the strong effect of the intervention in the current research, one of them being the adherence and proactivity of the teachers who applied the methodology.

More information: Ana Luiza Raggio Colagrossi et al, Adaptation and Efficacy of a Social-Emotional Learning Intervention (SEL Kernels) in Early Childhood Settings in Southeastern Brazil: A Quasi-Experimental Study, *Early Education and Development* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10409289.2023.2219583](https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2023.2219583)

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