

How Can Teachers Best Support Young Children's Emotional Competence?

Systematic review finds important holes in the evidence

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The Early Investments Policy Initiative team presented findings from a systematic review of the literature regarding practices to promote young children's emotional competencies at the American Educational Research Association conference in New York City on April 13, 2018.

Expectations for young children's emotional competencies are part of the social and emotional learning (SEL) standards that all 50 states have adopted, including [Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards](#) that expect children to understand and effectively communicate emotions and express them in situationally-appropriate ways. As in many other states, Illinois teachers must align their curricula and assessments to these standards as part of the state's [Excelebrate](#) system, which assigns medal levels (licensed, bronze, silver, gold) to all licensed centers and its [Preschool for All](#) funding focused on helping all young children be ready for school.

The evidence base for specific teaching practices to support these standards is thin, according to a key finding from "Building the Evidence Base for Social-Emotional Teaching Practices in Early Childhood" by IGPA faculty member Rachel Gordon, IGPA visiting scholar Katherine Zinsser, and UIC graduate student Xue Jiang.

The authors systematically identified published studies that had examined such practices and their relationship to children's emotion knowledge, expression and management. They found just 29 U.S. based studies focused on these topics.

Applying state-of-the-art meta-analysis procedures to these studies' results revealed a small overall effect (in scientific terms, a standard deviation increase in practices was associated with less than a tenth of a standard deviation difference in emotional competencies). The studies also had important limitations, such as being based on small convenience samples, primarily including non-Hispanic White middle-class children, and using designs that identified correlational rather than causal associations. The studies were also limited in how they measured practices and competencies, with studies of different competencies tending to rely on different strategies with varying limitations (e.g., direct assessments versus parent or teacher reports).

Studies of two SEL curricula had a moderate-sized effect (about two-fifths of a standard deviation in size), but these studies were also limited, being authored by curricular developers, sometimes having teachers rate children's competencies, and intervening to raise children's social as well as emotional development.

The authors conclude that more and better designed studies are needed in order to determine practices that support young children's developing emotional competencies. Such work should be a high priority given teachers need support in knowing how to address state standards in these specific areas. One effort currently underway, for instance, is the [EMOTERS project](#), a \$1.4 million effort funded by the Institute of Education Sciences in which members of the IGPA Early Investments Project team (and collaborators from George Mason University) are developing a new measure of teachers' supports for young children's emotional development.