

Chapter 6

How to foster social and emotional skills?

Policy makers, teachers and parents can play an important role in improving children's social and emotional skills. These skills, together with cognitive skills, are key ingredients of individual well-being and societal progress. Social and emotional skills can be reliably measured within a cultural and linguistic boundary. Policy makers can use this information to improve their understanding of the skill gaps and to better design policies to address them, while teachers and parents can widen the notion of children's skill needs and create positive learning environments. Social and emotional skills can be raised and mobilised for improving the life chances of children and society. This report identified the types of skills that matter and the ongoing policies, practices and interventions aimed at fostering them. This concluding chapter evaluates the gap between "what works" and "what happens in practice" in order to develop better strategies to enhance the skills that matter for children's lifetime success and for the well-being and progress of societies.

“But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” faltered Scrooge.

“Business!” cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens

Policy messages

There are a number of policy implications that emerge from the synthesis of evidence presented in this report.

Children need a well-balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills to achieve lifetime success and to contribute to social progress.

A wide set of cognitive, social and emotional skills have always mattered throughout human history, across a wide range of geographical and cultural regions. This report has shown that children from our generation are no different. They will require a comprehensive set of cognitive, social and emotional capabilities to better face the socio-economic challenges of the 21st century. Different types of skills are particularly important for different outcomes. Cognitive skills are particularly important for raising education and labour market outcomes. Social and emotional skills play a key role in promoting healthier lifestyles, active citizenship, improved life satisfaction and safer societies. However, cognitive and social and emotional skills do not necessarily act in isolation in driving positive behaviours and outcomes. These skills interact, cross-fertilise and further leverage their contribution to individual and societal progress.

Children’s capacities to achieve goals, work effectively with others and manage emotions help improve their lifetime outcomes. Social and emotional skills such as perseverance, sociability and self-esteem play a key role.

Evidence from the OECD’s empirical study, as well as the review of intervention studies, points to the social and emotional skills that drive children’s lifetime outcomes. These are the kind of skills that can be usefully deployed across different life situations: in achieving goals, collaborating with others and managing stressful situations. The evidence suggests that perseverance, sociability and self-esteem are among the social and emotional skills that children and society would benefit from developing. It is important, however, to take a nuanced perspective on skill needs since not all the social and emotional skills exhibit positive socio-economic outcomes. For example, in Norway, evidence showed an increase in the level of social and emotional skills such as extraversion reduced self-reported depression but at the same time increased self-reported obesity.

Social and emotional skills can be raised by improving learning environments and mobilising intervention programmes.

Social and emotional skills are **capacities that can be learned** and that enable individuals to successfully and consistently perform an activity or task and can be built upon and extended through learning. The evidence available from a few OECD countries suggests that there is scope to raise children’s skills through policy reforms, teachers’ innovations and parental efforts. A number of successful intervention programmes share common features: 1) emphasising attachment through warm and supportive relationships between parents, teachers, instructors and the child, and mentoring; 2) ensuring consistency in the quality of the learning environment across families, schools, workplaces and the community; 3) providing skills training for children and teachers based on learning practices that are sequenced, active, focused and explicit; and 4) introducing programmes between early childhood and adolescence, and following up and complementing on the prior investments made.

Interventions may be particularly helpful for disadvantaged groups as they generally lack access to stimulating home learning environments and tend to be exposed to more stressful situations, both of which hamper skills development. Since learning of social and emotional skills takes place in different contexts within and outside formal education, stakeholders acting in isolation cannot be as effective as concerted efforts. Schools need to join forces with families and local communities to improve the formation and development of skills.

The evidence suggests that “skills beget skills”, and early investment in social and emotional skills is key to improving the life prospects of the disadvantaged population and reducing socio-economic inequalities.

Children build on foundation skills developed early in their lives. Skills beget skills: children’s current levels of skills determine the extent to which they gain more skills in the future. This is due, in part, to the fact that those with higher skills benefit more from new learning investments and contexts. Therefore, early investments bring the biggest returns, securing higher level of skills and positive adult outcomes. Evidence suggests that while the sensitive period for developing cognitive skills takes place earlier in children’s lifecycle, the window for developing social and emotional skills continues during late childhood and adolescence. An efficient way to reduce inequalities in educational, labour market and social outcomes is to invest sufficiently early and throughout the school years in social and emotional skills among the most disadvantaged populations.

Regular assessments of social and emotional skills can provide valuable information to improve learning contexts and ensure they are conducive to skill development.

Social and emotional skills can be meaningfully measured at least within a cultural and linguistic boundary. Some existing measures have shown to be predictive of a variety of children’s life outcomes. Appropriate measures of relevant social and emotional skills, if regularly collected, can provide policy makers, teachers and parents with valuable information about deficits and trends in social and emotional skills. Good measures of such skills together with information on learning environments will help identify the learning contexts and inputs that are associated with children’s social and emotional development. This information is valuable for policy makers who need to identify education policy priorities, schools that need to reform curricular and extracurricular practices, and parents who need to adjust their home learning environments and parenting practices. Measuring social and emotional skills would also help raise awareness of the importance of these types of skills in promoting children’s lifetime success and societal progress.

While policy makers across OECD countries and partner economies acknowledge the importance of social and emotional skills, there are differences in the level of policies and programmes available to help schools and families develop these skills.

Most of the educational systems in OECD countries acknowledge the need to develop students’ social and emotional skills, such as autonomy, responsibility and the ability to co-operate with others. There are some local and experimental initiatives that provide useful teaching practices and materials to develop social and emotional skills. However, there are differences in the amount of policies and programmes available to help schools and families develop these skills. Moreover, policies and programmes specifically designed to enhance social and emotional skills rarely exists at the system level. It may be useful to make the information on local initiatives widely available, and also to experiment successful practices at the system level to identify robust approaches and to critically examine the strengths and limitations of experimental programmes. This will help countries better understand “what works” to raise social and emotional skills, under what conditions and for whom.

Many OECD countries and partner economies provide guidelines for schools to assess students' social and emotional skills, and schools tend to report these skills in school report cards. However, teachers and parents have limited access to detailed guidance on how to enhance these skills.

School report cards represent one of the most common ways for schools in the OECD countries and partner economics to measure and report students' social and emotional skills. Many countries provide guidelines for schools to assess this type of skills. In this way, parents have an opportunity to see how their children stand in terms of social and emotional development. Nevertheless, not many education systems provide detailed guidance for schools and teachers on how to help students develop social and emotional skills. While this provides schools and teachers flexibility in designing their own teaching strategies, this may not help those who have less knowledge and experience in teaching these skills.

Main findings from this report

	What we know	What we don't know
Social and emotional skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have a strong impact on social outcomes and subjective well-being. • Their impact can be partly explained by their influence in directly shaping individual's behaviour and lifestyle, which in turn shapes socio-economic outcomes. Their impact also lies in allowing people to benefit more from education. • Cognitive and social and emotional skills cross-fertilise. Those with higher levels of social and emotional skills show higher health returns to increasing cognitive skills. Those with higher levels of social and emotional skills demonstrate faster development of cognitive skills. • Among the most important drivers of lifetime outcomes include skills that increase children's capacity to achieve goals (e.g. perseverance), work with others (e.g. sociability) and manage emotions (e.g. self-esteem). • They are malleable during childhood and adolescence. • Validated measurement instruments are available within a cultural and linguistic boundary. There are methodologies to help reduce biases due to response-style and cross-cultural differences. These methodologies need to be further enhanced, building on the efforts made in PISA. OECD's ESP project will further explore this issue in the future. • Social and emotional skills can also exhibit negative effects on socio-economic outcomes. Some of these skills (e.g. extraversion) show positive effect on one outcome (e.g. reducing depression) but negative effect on another (e.g. reducing obesity) in Norway. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is only sparse evidence on the causal pathways between learning contexts, skills and outcomes. • Only a few studies have assessed the long-term impact (at least for 10 years) of these skills on socio-economic outcomes. • Instruments that would reliably measure the levels and development of social and emotional skills across cultural and linguistic boundaries do not exist. • There is limited evidence to explain why some social and emotional skills have positive effects on one outcome but negative effects on another.
Cognitive skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have a strong impact on education and labour market outcomes. • They are malleable. Their sensitive period appears to be relatively early in life compared to social and emotional skills. • Several international cross-culturally validated instruments are available, including those employed in PISA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International and cross-culturally validated instruments to assess growth of cognitive skills do not exist.
Learning contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families, schools and communities matter for the development of social and emotional skills. • Parental engagement and attachment have considerable impact on children's early social and emotional development. These are important features that recur most often among successful interventions. • Schools can foster social and emotional skills by strengthening interactions between teachers/mentors and students, mobilising real-life examples in curricular and extracurricular activities. • Family, school and community learning contexts can cross-fertilise. • Different learning contexts matter more at different stages of individuals' lives. • The current level of individual's skills determines the extent to which individuals can benefit from new learning investments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are only a few studies (including those evaluating the effectiveness of intervention programmes) allowing causal claims on the impact of learning contexts and practices on skills. • There is limited evidence on the community learning contexts that drive social and emotional development. • There are few studies that have assessed the long-term impact (at least for 10 years) of learning contexts and interventions on social and emotional development.

Gaps between “what works” and “what happens in practice”

Different education stakeholders face gaps in knowledge, expectations and capacities with regard to how to best enhance children’s social and emotional skills. These gaps create inefficiencies: they delay investments in skills; create discontinuities in investments across different stages of education; and create inequalities in the quality of learning environments. Narrowing these gaps is essential, as a wide range of education stakeholders need to be involved to effectively run programmes for skills development.

While the research community has started to generate information on which social and emotional skills matter and how to develop them, this knowledge doesn’t appear to be widely shared among the policy and practitioner communities. While individual teachers’ experience and parents’ know-how provide important guidance to determine the way in which children’s social and emotional skills can be improved, objective evidence based on large-scale longitudinal studies and intervention programmes can also offer useful insights. The research community may, in turn, learn from the practitioners’ community about the types of social and emotional skills and learning contexts that have not yet been considered by researchers. Researchers can only shed light on skills that can be measured and are already known to have some potential importance. Hence, there are potential exchanges between the two communities that would help bridge the gaps in educational practice and research.

While evidence suggests the importance of ensuring coherence in learning contexts across schools, families and communities, there seems to be limited information exchanged across these boundaries in policy or practice. Although there are often regular information exchanges between schools and parents, they are likely to be more concentrated on children’s academic capabilities. Information about children’s social and emotional skills is exchanged less intensively. Moreover, only limited information is transferred across different levels of schools systems. The extent to which children’s cognitive, social and emotional skills are communicated as children move up the school system (e.g. from kindergarten to primary, and primary to secondary schools) is not clear. Because “skills beget skills”, as emphasised in this report, it should be imperative for schools to share the details of children’s skills and their trajectory as they make progress through the school system.

One area where the gap between the evidence and ongoing practices is narrowing is on early investments. Currently, a large number of OECD member countries are taking early childhood education and care into serious consideration, and have started making adjustments to their education systems (OECD, 2012). It is crucial for these efforts to ensure fostering a multiplicity of skills, including socio-emotional skills, so that the outcomes and life chances of children are maximised and social progress is further supported.

One of the reasons behind the gap between the research and practitioner communities is the impression among teachers and school administrators that investing in social and emotional skills will involve significant additional efforts and resources. As described in Chapters 4 and 5, the experience in some countries suggests that this need not be the case. Enhancing social and emotional skills can be done hand in hand with ongoing efforts to enhance cognitive skills. Nurturing children’s social and emotional development can be done by adapting current teaching and learning practices at the margin. Most effective skill training programmes are those that incorporate learning practices with sequenced training, active forms of learning, focus time and attention to skill development tasks, and explicit learning objectives (SAFE principle). A holistic approach to skill formation can, and should, be incorporated into the classroom.

The way forward

This chapter concludes by presenting suggestions for stakeholders who wish to improve policies, practices and research with regard to the formation and development of social and emotional skills in children.

For policy makers

- Reflect on the key objectives of the education system to assess whether current policies and practices are conducive to achieving the goal of enhancing a comprehensive set of skills – including social and emotional skills – in children, or whether a new portfolio of policies is needed that would strengthen these skills.
- Take concrete measures to adopt and provide enough support for practices that foster a broader set of skills – including social and emotional skills – that ensure a more productive, inclusive, greener and cohesive society.
- Promote system-wide endorsement in supporting and incorporating social and emotional learning in curricula. This will help encourage teachers who believe in the importance of social and emotional development, yet face pressure to prepare students to perform well on core-curriculum subjects, such as mathematics and language.
- Consider measuring cognitive, social and emotional skills from early childhood until adulthood to build more evidence that informs policy and practices.

For school administrators

- Assess whether the school system is investing enough in enhancing and measuring social and emotional skills.
- Assess whether the measurements and methodologies used to enhance social and emotional skills are appropriate.
- Encourage the involvement of parents and the broader community, and ensure that they complement school-based efforts to foster social and emotional skills.
- Promote system-wide endorsement in incorporating social and emotional learning in the curriculum. This will help encourage teachers who believe in the importance of social and emotional development, yet face pressure to prepare students to perform well on core-curriculum subjects, such as mathematics and language.

For researchers

- Identify learning contexts as well as social and emotional skills that drive children's future prospects. The goal here is not only to identify the conditions under which learning contexts (that are known to work) function, but also to identify the potentially important learning contexts and skills that are lesser known. It would be important to develop a comprehensive framework to better understand the multiplicity of interventions, learning contexts and policy levers that may matter. Qualitative studies could help on this front.
- Identify social and emotional skills relevant for children in early childhood to early adolescence that can be reliably measured and are cross-culturally and cross-linguistically robust.
- Better clarify the causal pathways that explain the relationships between learning contexts, skills and outcomes. In particular, it is important to identify how different learning contexts play together in driving skill development. It is equally important to identify how different

skills – cognitive, social and emotional – play together in driving positive educational, labour market and social outcomes.

- Expand evidence from intervention studies, including those outside the United States, where evidence is relatively abundant.

For the OECD

- Continue synthesising information on policies, practices and research related to social and emotional skills. This can be done by working with countries and other OECD activities (e.g. those that shed light on early childhood education and care and teachers) to identify parenting and teaching practices that would foster these skills.
- Continue conducting empirical work on longitudinal data from OECD countries and partner economies to improve the evidence base.
- Continue disseminating the findings widely among stakeholders.
- Continue making efforts to develop and validate measures of social and emotional skills that are robust across cultural and linguistic boundaries, building on prior investments made in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).
- Develop strategies to launch an international longitudinal data collection on the dynamics of social and emotional skills.

On the last point, the OECD is currently preparing an international longitudinal study of skill development in cities. This is motivated by the lack of internationally comparable longitudinal data on skills that track children over time. The empirical analyses shown in Chapter 3 and 4 had to rely on existing longitudinal studies that included limited measures of skills that were not comparable across countries. The aim of the OECD's new data collection is to follow the lives of two child cohorts (Grades 1 and 7 – approximately 6 and 12 years old, respectively), by collecting data on a host of social and emotional skill measures, learning contexts and socio-economic outcomes over time. In the short term, the micro-data will be used to assess the distribution of social and emotional skills and to identify the learning contexts associated with their development. In the medium term, the data will be used to evaluate social and emotional skills formation as children move up the educational system. In the long term, the data will be used to shed light on the relevant policy inputs that could help to improve social and emotional skills and identify the skills that drive individuals' lifetime success, such as tertiary attainment, smooth transition from school to work, following healthy lifestyles and active citizenship. Box 6.1 summarises the main characteristics of the proposed study.

Box 6.1. OECD's International Longitudinal Study of Skill Development in Cities

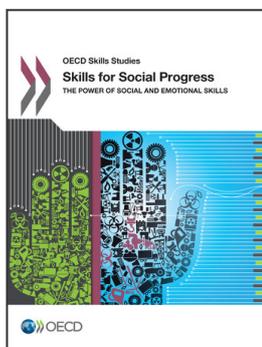
• Objectives	To identify the process of social and emotional skills formation and its socio-economic outcomes.
• Respondents	Students, teachers and parents.
• Target cohorts	Children in Grades 1 and 7 (approximately 6 and 12 years old, respectively).
• Geographical coverage	Major cities, states or provinces (with an option of nation-wide coverage).
• Sampling method	Random selection of schools. Full sampling of Grade 1 and 7 cohorts within schools.
• Duration	Minimum of three years. Ideally until early adulthood.
• Measures of skills	Focus on diverse measures of social and emotional skills.
• Measures of contexts	School, family and community learning contexts.
• Measures of outcomes	Education, labour market, health, bullying, civic engagement, subjective well-being, etc.

Conclusion

The importance of enhancing children's social and emotional skills is ever more pressing given today's socio-economic climate. In order to help individuals meet the challenges of the modern world, policy makers need to think more broadly and consider a wide range of capabilities, where social and emotional skills are just as important as cognitive skills. The existing evidence base shows that learning takes place in different contexts within and outside of formal educational structures, and that different types of learning are needed to foster the diverse skills that matter. Policy makers, researchers, school administrators, teachers and parents need to work together, and to share their experiences on what works in enhancing social and emotional skills. Making every effort to better invest in children's skills development can lead to achieving more prosperous, healthy and satisfying lives.

Reference

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