



# Youth Socioemotional Wellbeing

## Evidence Review

### Evidence to Action Note


December 2021


#### Snapshot

- Socioemotional wellbeing is essential for our overall health and wellbeing. Fostering socioemotional wellbeing in young people helps them to realise their abilities, cope with normal stresses of day-to-day life, work productively and contribute to their community.
- The Research Centre for Children and Families at the University of Sydney conducted an evidence review on programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people aged 10-24.
- The evidence review identified 32 evidence-informed programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people.
- Key outcomes for these programs include: social skills and communication, self-efficacy and confidence, emotional regulation and self-regulation, and decision-making and problem-solving.
- 5 core components were identified that are common across programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing and are recommended as standard program components:
  - Self-concept, self-efficacy and confidence
  - Mindfulness and self-regulation
  - Prosocial skills and relationship-building
  - Building motivation and monitoring behavioural change
  - Building knowledge and awareness for socioemotional wellbeing.
- Implications are discussed for program design and delivery.

#### Introduction

Children and young people's socioemotional wellbeing is a key component of mental health and wellbeing. Socioemotional wellbeing is a state of wellbeing that encompasses personality traits and skills that characterise one's relationships in a social environment. Programs that seek to improve socioemotional wellbeing build





behavioural and emotional strengths and the ability to adapt and deal with daily challenges and respond positively to adversity while leading a fulfilling life.<sup>1</sup>

This Evidence to Action note describes research on programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people aged 10-24. It builds upon an Evidence and Gap Map (EGM) conducted in 2021 which summarised findings from a systematic search for interventions that reduce risky behaviours and/or foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people. The EGM identified 188 studies, 76 of which evaluated programs that targeted socioemotional wellbeing outcomes. This evidence review summary reports on strength of evidence for interventions across these 76 studies. After a comprehensive quality assessment, core components and flexible activities of the programs were identified. These are the key practices embedded in programs that are understood to be significant for effectively delivering positive socioemotional wellbeing outcomes for young people.

## Why is this important?

Socioemotional wellbeing is important to enable children and young people to thrive in adolescence and into adulthood. Young people who are socioemotionally well and competent have been found to:

- communicate well
- have healthy relationships
- be confident
- perform better at school
- take on and persist with challenging tasks; and
- be resilient against life stressors.<sup>2</sup>


While young people's individual characteristics contribute to their socioemotional wellbeing, relationships and interactions with their family, school and community environments can also have a significant influence.<sup>3</sup> A meta-analysis of school-based interventions conducted in 2011 found that social and emotional skills can be taught in school environments, and can have a positive impact on attitudes, behaviours and academic outcomes.<sup>4</sup>


An understanding of what works to foster socioemotional wellbeing is an important precursor to giving young people the right supports and healthy role models to allow them to effectively navigate higher education, employment, and family and community involvement.

## What did the evidence review find?

### Method

Rapid Evidence Assessment was used to search and critically appraise research from the last eleven years (2010-2021) on programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people. After searching for academic and grey literature, 76






studies met screening criteria. Following risk of bias assessment, 51 studies underwent data extraction and evidence rating. The *NSW Department of Communities and Justice Evidence Rating Scale* was used to report on the level of supporting evidence available for each program identified in the review.

A content analysis identified five core components and related flexible activities common across 32 programs that were rated as having mixed or positive effects on outcomes. Per the [Evidence Portal Technical Specifications](#), which guided the project, **core components** are defined as “the fixed aspects of an intervention or program” while **flexible activities** “are the different ways the intervention may be implemented, according to the local context.”

## Key findings

The 32 programs evaluated varied substantially, making them difficult to compare. The majority of programs (n = 26, or 81 percent) were evaluated in the USA, 3 were evaluated in Canada, 2 in Australia and 1 in both the USA and Canada. Most programs were delivered in groups either in school or community settings (n = 20, or 63 percent), while some programs were delivered online via web platforms (n = 8, or 25 percent), and the remainder were delivered in-person during one-on-one sessions between program facilitator and participant (n = 3, or 9 percent) and via text-messaging (n = 1, or 3 percent). 25 of 32 programs (or 78 percent) were delivered to late-primary and high school or secondary school-age young people. The remainder of programs were delivered to university-age students and young people (n = 6, or 19 percent) and to young people across secondary school and university-age brackets (n = 1, or 3 percent). Social skills and communication, self-efficacy and confidence, emotional regulation and self-regulation, and decision-making and problem-solving were identified as primary outcome domains (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Outcome domains<sup>5</sup>**

**Social Skills & Communication**

*Skills that allow us to successfully operate with other people in society*

**Self-Efficacy & Confidence**

*A person's belief in their own ability to achieve goals*



**Emotional Regulation & Self-Regulation**

*A person's ability to adapt their behaviour according to either internal or external standards, goals or ideals*

**Decision making & Problem Solving**

*Making decisions based on consideration of all relevant factors*

The approach for rating evidence is adapted from other publicly available evidence rating scales, including the [Early Intervention Foundation Evidence Standards](#) and the Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook (Version 4.0).<sup>6</sup> First, the evidence for each outcome domain within programs is rated, then the overall evidence rating for the programs are described. Ratings are on a scale from 'Well supported by research evidence' to 'Evidence demonstrates adverse effects' (see the Technical Specifications for more detail). Of the 32 programs, 22 (or 69 percent) were rated *Mixed research evidence with no adverse effects*, and 10 (or 31 percent) were rated *Promising research evidence*.

## Core components and flexible activities

Five core components are common across these programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people (see Table 1). They are recommended as standard program components that should be delivered by socioemotional wellbeing programs addressing outcomes identified in Figure 1.

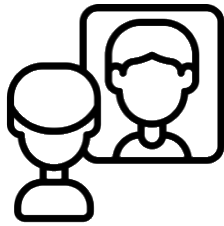
**Table 1. Descriptions of core components**

Core component	Description
Self-concept, self-efficacy and confidence	Self-concept, self-efficacy and confidence aims to foster self-efficacy and self-awareness through positive self-identity, body image and cultural connectedness or identity.
Mindfulness and self-regulation	Mindfulness and self-regulation aims to teach strategies that enable self-regulation, stress management and emotional regulation.
Prosocial skills and relationship-building	Prosocial skills and relationship-building aims to build social skills required to positively interact with prosocial peers and community members through fostering communication and engaged learning with others.
Building motivation and monitoring behavioural change	Building motivation and monitoring behavioural change aims to motivate a behavioural change or attitude and/or monitor and document behavioural changes over time.
Building knowledge and awareness for socioemotional wellbeing	Building knowledge and awareness for socioemotional wellbeing focuses on learning and development activities that underpin the other core components.

The evidence review also identified 25 flexible activities (see Figure 2). These flexible activities describe the different ways core components can be implemented. They can be used to design a program that is tailored to the local needs of communities and the individual preferences of clients.

While the core components are fixed, the flexible activities can be tailored to local contexts and client needs.

**Figure 2. Core components for programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing, with flexible activities**



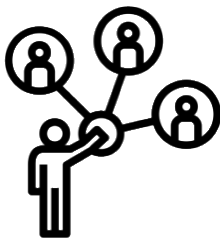
***Self-concept, self-efficacy and confidence***

- Identifying triggers and adaptive strategies for dealing with difficult situations
- Fostering a safe and supportive environment
- Fostering autonomy and independence
- Building skills including refusal, assertiveness and critical thinking skills
- Providing opportunities for creative expression or outlet



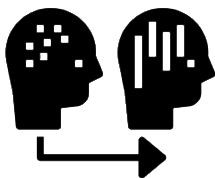
***Mindfulness and self-regulation***

- Journaling or self-reflection
- Yoga
- Breathing exercises
- Relaxation and muscle relaxation
- Mindfulness and self-regulation



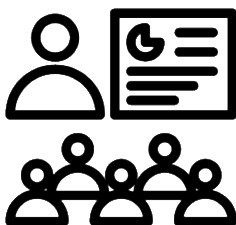
***Prosocial skills and relationship-building***

- Establishing and maintaining healthy relationships
- Building communication skills
- Community engagement
- Group discussion or work
- Peer learning and support



***Building motivation and monitoring behavioural change***

- Goal-setting
- Personalised assessment or screening
- Feedback (generic or personalised)
- Tracking or monitoring
- Booster messages or reinforcement



***Building knowledge and awareness for socioemotional wellbeing***

- Learning and development activities to enable critical thinking
- Learning and development activities to enable meta-cognition and self-regulation
- Learning and development activities to address sexual and substance use risk
- Learning and development activities to promote healthy relationships
- Learning and development activities related to social norms




## Limitations

This evidence review is subject to some limitations. None of the programs have been trialled with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and culturally and linguistically diverse populations in an Australian context. The significant variation in programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people complicates judgements on effectiveness.

Due to the strict inclusion criteria that guided the process, all systematic reviews and meta-analyses were excluded from the review due to risk of bias. Therefore, no study could be rated as 'Well supported by research evidence' as this requires a systematic review reporting statistically significant findings for at least one outcome.

## Where to from here?

The findings of this evidence review have implications for the design and delivery of programs that aim to foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people. These programs should aim to incorporate and consider:

1. An **learning and development** element that aims to build knowledge relevant to the program aims and outcomes
    - a. Program developers should consider: *What content do I need to provide?*
    - b. Delivery mode: learning and development activities can be delivered in a number of ways including via structured and unstructured learning, multimedia or social media platforms, interactive sessions, review sessions and through home-learning, homework and at-home practice.
  2. A **practice** element that aims to offer activities and skill-building relevant to the program aims and outcomes
    - a. Program developers should consider: *How could my participants practice these skills?*
    - b. Delivery mode: group dynamics are useful for delivery of skill-building and practice. Group sessions and group work can allow for activities such as roleplaying, modelling, peer learning, games and creative expression.
  3. A **monitoring** element that aims to track participants' progress over time and monitor changes in behaviours and attitudes
    - a. Program developers should consider: *How do I monitor changes from baseline and over the course of the program? How do I check whether these changes are sustained?*
    - b. Delivery mode: monitoring and tracking can be undertaken by the program facilitator via assessments administered over time, or via self-report from the program participants such as through a diarised log.
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<sup>1</sup> AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2012. *Social and emotional wellbeing: development of a Children's Headline Indicator*. Cat. no. PHE 158. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>2</sup> AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2012.

<sup>3</sup> AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, Dymnicki AB, Taylor RD & Schellinger K 2011. The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development* 82(1): 405–432.

<sup>5</sup> McNeil, B, Reeder, N, & Rich, J 2012, *A framework of outcomes for young people*. Young Foundation, viewed 1 November 2021, <https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Framework-of-outcomes-for-young-people-July-2012.pdf>; and Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning n.d., *What Is the CASEL Framework?* Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, viewed 1 November 2021, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/>

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Education 2017, *What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and standards handbook (Version 4.0)*. United States Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, What Works Clearinghouse, Washington, DC.