



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

MISSISSAUGA

Centre for Child Development, Mental Health, and Policy



Creating a Lasting Impact on Mental Health by Supporting Children's Social-Emotional Development

POLICY BRIEF

Centre for Child Development,
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OVERVIEW

- Social-emotional capacities (i.e., emotion regulation, empathy) develop early in childhood and are foundational for children's lifelong mental health, relationships, and success.
- Children and youth with strong social-emotional capacities experience better mental health, academic achievement, and relationship quality.
- Integrating early social-emotional development content into educator and caregiver training can promote healthier long-term developmental outcomes and mental health.
- Community-based initiatives that incorporate social-emotional and mental health research through participatory approaches can address the unique needs of Canada's diverse populations.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Social-emotional development equips children with essential tools for managing their emotions, connecting with others, and reflecting on themselves and how they relate to the broader world around them (Malti et al., 2015). These skills are valuable in helping children cope with stress, overcome challenges, and foster healthy relationships (Malti, 2020). Three core components of social-emotional development include:

Emotion Regulation	The ability to manage one's emotions to achieve goals and behave appropriately. Emotion regulation helps children cope with challenges, engage in their surroundings with attention, and problem-solve, and is a robust predictor of mental health into adolescence and adulthood (Compas et al., 2017; Schäfer et al., 2017; Song et al., 2018).
Empathy for Others	The capacity to understand and feel others' emotions. Empathy for others orients children to others' needs and fosters positive social interactions, reduces aggression, and encourages prosocial behaviours, like sharing and cooperation (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Malti & Krettenauer, 2013).
Empathy for the Self	The ability to engage in self-directed kindness that helps children accept their own limitations and recognize when they have not behaved in a manner that is consistent with their own standards. Empathy for the self is important because it propels children to make amends for their transgressions and helps them learn to treat themselves with compassion (Malti & Speidel, 2023).

Supporting the development of these skills- *"The 3Es"* (Emotion Regulation, Empathy for Others, Empathy for the Self)-helps children form stronger, more meaningful relationships, while also maintaining kindness towards themselves as they grow (Malti & Krettenauer, 2013; Malti et al., 2016; Song et al., 2018).

SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS AND EDUCATORS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN

The early years are critical for social-emotional development (Malti & Speidel, 2024), making this an optimal window for intervention. Children's early social-emotional capacities are also actively shaped by their early environments, particularly the warmth, sensitivity, and structure provided by caregivers and educators (Morris et al., 2007; Spinrad & Gal, 2018). Research from the Centre for Child Development, Mental Health, and Policy indicates promising evidence for the utility of brief caregiver and educator training initiatives in improving caregiver and educator knowledge of social-emotional development and use of training strategies at home and at care, and in supporting children's, caregivers', and educators' own well-being in communities in Canada (Al-Janaideh et al., 2023; Speidel et al., 2023).

TAILORED SUPPORT TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

Canada's growing mental health crisis disproportionately impacts minoritized and newcomer communities, where children face additional barriers to services (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020; Georgiades et al., 2019; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2015). Despite policy efforts, gaps persist in meeting the social-emotional needs of diverse communities. Community-based research initiatives are a promising approach to address these gaps because they prioritize local input and insights to inform program design and tailoring to ensure that interventions reflect the specific strengths and needs of different communities (Malti & Cheah, 2021; Malti & Speidel, 2024).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Review Ontario's current elementary and secondary curriculum to integrate new research on social-emotional development and mental health.**

Social-emotional development is addressed in the Health & Physical Education curriculum under "Social-Emotional Learning Skills", which was last updated in 2019. A comprehensive review of the current Ontario elementary and secondary curricula can help ensure the integration of the latest evidence-based practices, such as The 3Es of Social-Emotional Development©.
- 2 Invest in educator training in social-emotional development and mental health.**

Fund and increase access to evidence-based professional development for educators and child care providers with a focus on social-emotional development and mental health.
- 3 Support parent and caregiver education in social-emotional development and mental health.**

Fund initiatives that offer caregivers evidence-based resources to support social-emotional development and mental health at home, fostering consistency across home and educational settings.
- 4 Promote community-based initiatives.**

Invest in initiatives tailored to historically marginalized communities to improve equity and accessibility in social-emotional and mental health curricula, ensuring all children in Canada receive effective and culturally relevant care

This brief highlights insights and recommendations based on research conducted at the Centre for Child Development, Mental Health, and Policy and developmental-clinical research in the areas of social-emotional development and mental health.

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