



Building the Social Emotional Competence of Autistic Students: *The Westmead Feelings Program across stages and settings*



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Wong, Ratcliffe, Gardner, Dossetor, Li & Elphick 2022



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1

Outline

1. Social-emotional learning and its importance for students on the autism spectrum with and without intellectual disability
2. Evidence-based social-emotional learning programs
3. The curriculum and teaching methods utilised in the Westmead Feelings Program
4. Research findings - elements that contribute to programs being practical for delivery in schools



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1

Social-Emotional Skills, Mental Health and Wellbeing

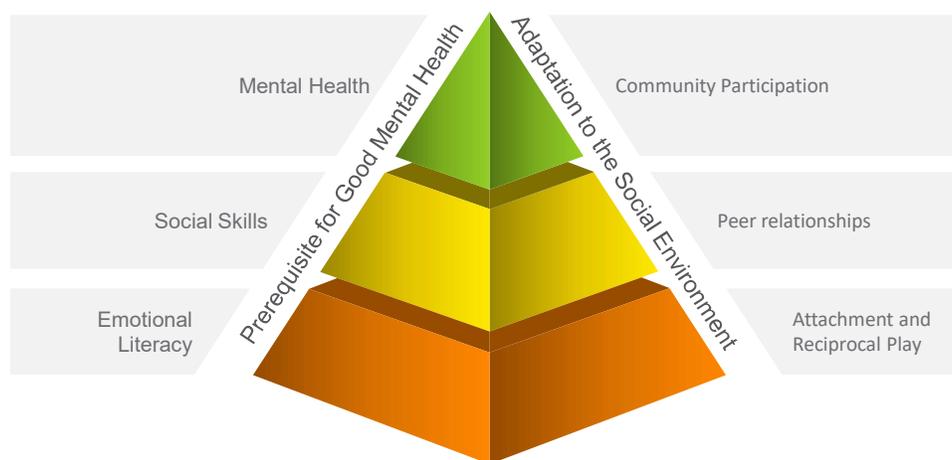
- Social-emotional delays are a core deficit for autistic students.
- 88% of autistic people have additional co-occurring disabilities or mental health conditions.
- Associations between social-emotional delays and mental health conditions.
- Enhancing emotional development enhances relationships, long-term adjustment and prognosis.

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Brereton et al., 2006; Chandler et al., 2016; Leyfer et al., 2006; Russell et al., 2019; Wood & Kroese, 2007)



3

Why is social-emotional learning important?



Mental health and wellbeing can be improved by teaching autistic students social-emotional skills.



4

2

Mental Health Programs for Autistic Students

- In addition to the impact of Autism on students, the mental health conditions they suffer from are of at least the same severity as that of their disability.
- Unlike Autism, mental health conditions are reversible and preventable.
- 50% of autistic students have an intellectual disability, however, there is little research or evidence-based programs to promote mental health and social emotional competence.



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Social-Emotional Programs for Autistic Students

	Secret Agent Society	Stop Think Do	PEERS	Social Decision Making	Zones of Regulation	Konkakt	WFP
Autistic students with ID				✓	✓		✓
Mental health problem prevention							✓
Parent/teacher sessions	✓	✓	✓				✓
Emotion skills	✓				✓		✓
Social skills	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Evidence-based strategies	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Theoretical model	✓		✓				✓
Controlled studies	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓



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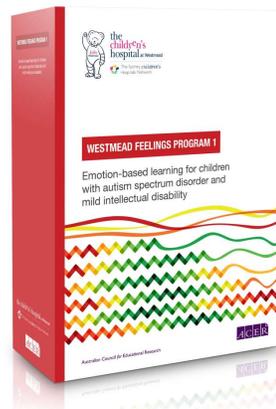
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3

Westmead Feelings Program: Emotion-based learning for Children with Autism

Group-based program that enhances mental health and wellbeing in autistic students, with and without ID, by teaching social-emotional skills.



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Curriculum based on Developmental Models

Students with and without mild intellectual disability

Only evidence-based programs in the world for children with and without intellectual disabilities.

All ages

Specific programs for children and adolescents.

3 modules - 16 sessions

Understanding emotions, problem solving & perspective taking, managing emotions



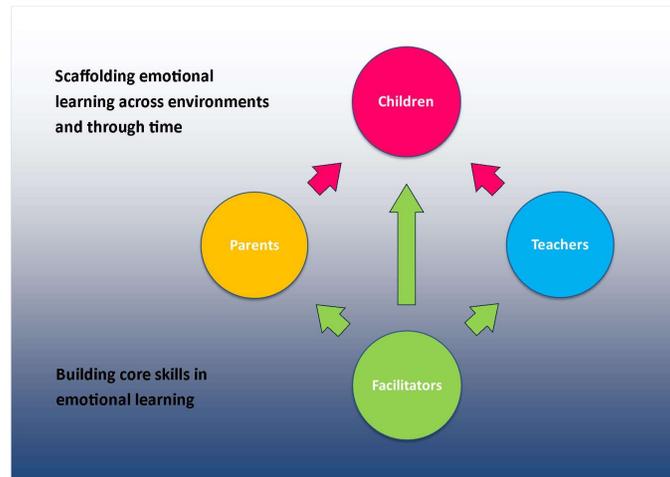
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Individual, Family, and Educational Supports for Social Emotional Learning



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Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

- Australia's largest service provider for people on the autism spectrum
- One of the world's largest specialised, evidence-informed schools program, with additional services that include information and advice, diagnostic assessments, behaviour support, parent and family support and adult programs
- Aspect's designated research centre conducts participatory research to inform practices that support Autistic people and their families and carers to realise their goals and aspirations



Aspect Education

- Over 50 years experience in providing autism-specific schooling in Australia
- 9 independent schools and 113 satellite classes based in mainstream primary and



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Westmead Feelings Program Curriculum

Module	Students	Parents & Teachers
1	Understanding emotions	Psychoeducation Emotion coaching Emotionally attuned parenting
2	Emotions problem solving Understanding others' emotions	Emotional problem solving Promoting theory of mind
3	Regulating emotions	Regulating emotions

Theory driven:
Emotional Competence, Emotional Development, Emotional Intelligence



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Social-emotional learning and the PDHPE Curriculum



Diagram sourced from PDHPE K-10 Syllabus 2018



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Social-emotional learning and the PDHPE Curriculum

Interpersonal skills

- Communicate and express feelings
- Negotiate and resolve conflict with others.
- Build relationships with others
- Understand another person's perspective



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Social-emotional learning and the PDHPE Curriculum

Self management

- Decision-making
- Problem-solving
- Help-seeking skills



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Social-emotional learning and the Aspect Comprehensive Approach (ACA)



**Based on Autism Initiatives 5 Point Star*



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15

Social-emotional Learning in Schools

- SEL is positively associated with student learning and wellbeing (Durlak et al., 2011)
- Teaching SEL in classrooms is a priority in Australia, underpinned by CASL priorities (Cahill et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2018, Sagggers et al., 2015)
- Research practice gap: evidence-based teaching strategies should form the basis of SEL, but are not always implemented in schools (Durlak et al., 2011)



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Curriculum Considerations

Information Processing

- Visual cues
- Video modeling
- Written and video social stories
- Comic strip conversations
- Live modeling
- Repetition of key points using varied teaching methods
- Structured breaks and games
- Modify pace

Generalisation

- Practice through home-based tasks
- Parent and teacher programs, handouts, and visual cues
- Promote parent and teacher self-evaluation and monitoring
- Use of rewards to motivate
- Practice through role plays
- Breaks between modules



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Module 1 – Understanding Emotions

The Feeling Sad Strength Bar

3		very sad
2		sad
1		a little sad
0		okay



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Module 2 – Problem Solving & Perspective Taking



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Module 3 – Regulating Emotions



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10

Westmead Feelings Program Evidence



Improving Emotional Competence in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder and Mild Intellectual Disability in Schools: A Preliminary Treatment Versus Waitlist Study

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 26 June 2019

Belinda Ratcliffe ^a, Michelle Wong ^a, David Dosssetor and Susan Hayes

Show author details



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders

Journal homepage: <http://ees.elsevier.com/RASD/default.asp>



Teaching social–emotional skills to school-aged children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A treatment versus control trial in 41 mainstream schools



Belinda Ratcliffe ^a, Michelle Wong ^a, David Dosssetor ^a, Susan Hayes ^b



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Aim of Current Study

Evaluate the acceptability, feasibility and impact of The Westmead Feelings Program on the social-emotional competence skills of autistic students, with and without ID, across different education settings and stages.



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Method

Participants: 91 facilitators and 396 students aged 8-18 years old in support classes, mainstream schools and a whole school special education environment.

Procedure

- (i) Facilitators receive WFP Facilitator Training & Certification in workshops or online course
- (ii) Facilitators deliver WFP to students
- (iii) Feasibility, acceptability and impact assessed via facilitator interviews and questionnaires



Results

What worked well?



Student engagement Facilitator manuals Facilitator confidence

Visual supports and materials good, however, a lot of time to set up and pack away.





25

Results

Suggested changes?

- Resources to integrate into current classroom systems:
*“Rules and schedules on class interactive whiteboard”,
“homework handouts”, “print resources”*
- Modify examples for high school students
- Flexibility to extend or adjust the program to better meet individual learning needs.
- Parent program: *“They’re very busy”, “Digital delivery”*

< 26 >

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26

Results

What was the impact of WFP on students?



WFP helpful for students (100%)

- Engagement with evidence-based strategies: *“Students were 100% engaged... Autism specific teaching strategies were awesome with consistent visuals and video modelling and repetition.”*
- Development of consistent emotional language: *“It brought cohesiveness to all the students.”*

< 27 >

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27

Results

What was the impact of WFP on students?

- Impact in real life situations of social-emotional learning:
“The program has made a significant difference in the way students identify and regulate their emotions and understand the emotions of others.”
- Relationships fostered:
“Although two students were friendly, the other two are not really, and don't really socialise and so it was really nice that they were all talking to each other and talking about home and stuff like that”

< 28 >

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14

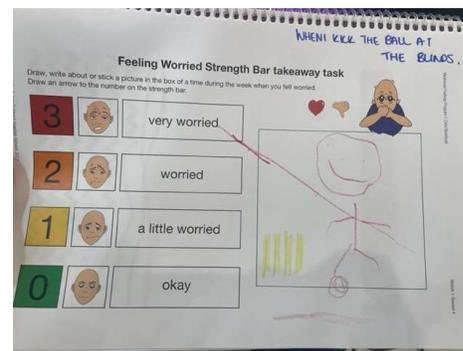
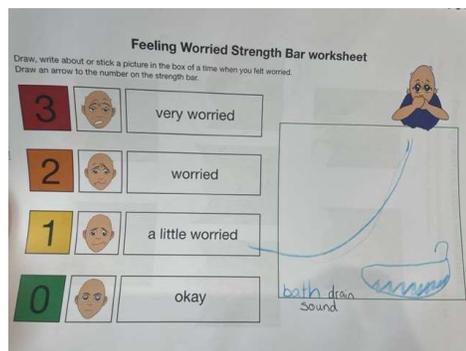
Results

How does WFP fit with your understanding of what's important for autistic students and how they learn?

- Technology and structured teaching:
"Students love the technology (videos) and the visuals." "They engaged with the structured teaching methods of WFP."
- Generalisation of skills outside sessions:
"The range of skills in WFP are readily taught in different situations." "The approaches used in WFP continued to be used in naturalistic classroom situations after WFP was complete, and were easily integrated with other social emotional programs".



Understanding Emotions – Student Examples



Perspective Taking and Problem Solving – Student Examples

Perspective-taking takeaway task
What happened? (Draw or write about it.)

I LOST A GAME OF MARIO CART, TO DADDY

Feeling for: DOMINIC (ME)

Feeling for: DADDY

What body sign shows us the feeling? (Circle it.)

Why do they feel this way?

I LOST THE GAME

DADDY WON HAPPY.

Problem-solving worksheet
What happened? (Draw or write about it.)

ADAM BROKE KATE'S TOY

Feeling: happy sad worried angry okay

I can do problem solving.

STOP

What could I do?

Decide what to do:

Conclusions

- WFP is likely to be an acceptable and feasible program to deliver in schools across a range of settings and stages.
- Program improvements include adaptations for adolescents and flexible program delivery in classrooms and for parents.

Conclusions

Project limitations

- Data collected from facilitators, not students or parents
- No long term follow-up

Project strengths

- Study conducted in range of naturalistic environments
- High quality WFP facilitator training provided
- Engagement of schools, professionals, students



Future Directions

- Digital program: fidelity and impact data, flexibility, better classroom integration, feedback → updates
- Parent materials: free materials without a facilitator, range of delivery methods for facilitated program (recorded sessions, Facebook, online self-paced program)
- Adolescent adaptation
- Complex learning needs: autism, ID, cerebral palsy





Questions and Comments



<https://schn.health.nsw.gov.au/professionals.learn/wfp>



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