
This article is based on the Campbell Review:

Wilson SJ & Lipsey MW: *The Effects of School-based Social Information Processing Interventions on Aggressive Behaviour, Part I: Universal Programmes & Part II: Selected/Indicated Pull-out Programmes*. The Campbell Collaboration 2007.

*This article is written by the Nordic Campbell Centre. The article has been approved by the authors of the review.
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Education programmes may reduce bullying and conflicts among children

School-based education programmes aimed at children's ability to interpret social situations may reduce aggressive and disruptive behaviour among children. These are the findings of a systematic Campbell review of the best international research findings in the field.

Trouble in the playground

Fighting, arguments and bullying among school children is a widespread problem. Attempts are often made to counter these social problems by introducing school-based education programmes, which, in one way or another, aim to remedy violent and disruptive behaviour.

This systematic review examines one such type of education programme: the type that seeks to strengthen cognitive skills and thought patterns among children to improve their ability to interpret and respond to cues from the world around them (so-called *Social Information Processing Interventions*).

The researchers examine two groups of education programmes: those aimed at entire classes and those aimed at selected children who either have behavioural problems or are at risk of developing them.

Positive effect

The researchers' conclusion is clear: children who participate in this type of education programme exhibit less aggressive and disruptive behaviour than children who do not participate. The positive effect is achieved in both groups in the study, albeit with some variation in the findings:

As regards programmes for entire classes, the research indicates that short, intensive interventions – e.g. 8-16 weeks of 2-5 hours a week – are more effective than extended year-long programmes. Extended programmes may have a tendency to become routine and thus have less impact on the students.

Where the education programmes target children in special education classes, the effect is lesser than in ordinary classes. Pupils in special classes may be prone to many other problems which could reduce the impact of this type of education.

Conversely, the effect achieved appears to be especially large where the intervention is delivered outside of the regular classroom to children who are at risk for developing later behavioural problems. The researchers maintain that this may be due to the fact that children in the at-risk group have greater change potential.

Focus on thought patterns rather than on behaviour

The education programmes in the research review sort under the general concept of *Social Information Processing Interventions*. This concept embodies a number of different interventions, all of which seek to train children to encode and interpret information and cues in social interaction, and to identify an appropriate response.

Through structured exercises and activities, the education is designed to build the children's capacity in respect of one or more of the following six stages:

1. Encoding of own and others' cues
2. Interpretation of cues
3. Clarifying a goal
4. Identifying possible responses for achieving the goal
5. Choosing a response
6. Behavioural response enactment

The idea is that negative social behaviour, aggression for instance, may be construed as symptomatic of cognitive deficits at one or more of the above stages. The education programmes are designed to remedy these cognitive deficits.

Thus, the education focuses on building the children's cognitive skills and thought patterns rather than on directly modifying their behaviour. In this way, these education programmes are distinct from the many different types of behaviour-focused interventions currently practised. By directing attention at thought patterns instead of at behaviour, the aim is to strengthen the children's general social skills.

Facts about the systematic review

All education programmes in the review were conducted during normal school hours. The research review falls into two parts. One part, which examines ordinary classes, is based on 73 individual studies, while the other part, which looks at selected children with behavioural problems or at risk of developing them, is based on 47 studies.

Programmes in the first part are delivered to essentially equal numbers of girls and boys aged 4-16. In the second part, the programme participants are primarily boys aged 6 to 16. This difference may be seen as an indication that boys generally make up the majority of pupils exhibiting at-risk or aggressive behaviour. The programmes in the second part also include more children from different ethnic backgrounds than the first part of the research review. Around half of the pupils are from lower socio-economic background families.

For both parts, the majority of the studies were conducted in the USA, while studies from Australia, Canada, Italy, Finland, Israel and India were also included.

Other research in the area

Internationally, a number of social skills studies already exist. However, the majority of these studies address social skills in a more general sense and do not have the specific focus on education programmes adopted by the present research review.